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Maurois, Andre/Bernard Quesnay: a novel



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Quesnay

André Maurois

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BERNARD QUESNAY

By ANDRÉ MAUROIS

BERNARD QUESNAY

ARIEL: THE LIFE OF SHELLEY

CAPTAINS AND KINGS

MAPE: THE WORLD OF ILLUSION

BERNARD QUESNAY

PQ



A NOVEL



2625

A95

B413

BY

ANDRÉ MAUROIS



TRANSLATED BY
BRIAN W. DOWNS



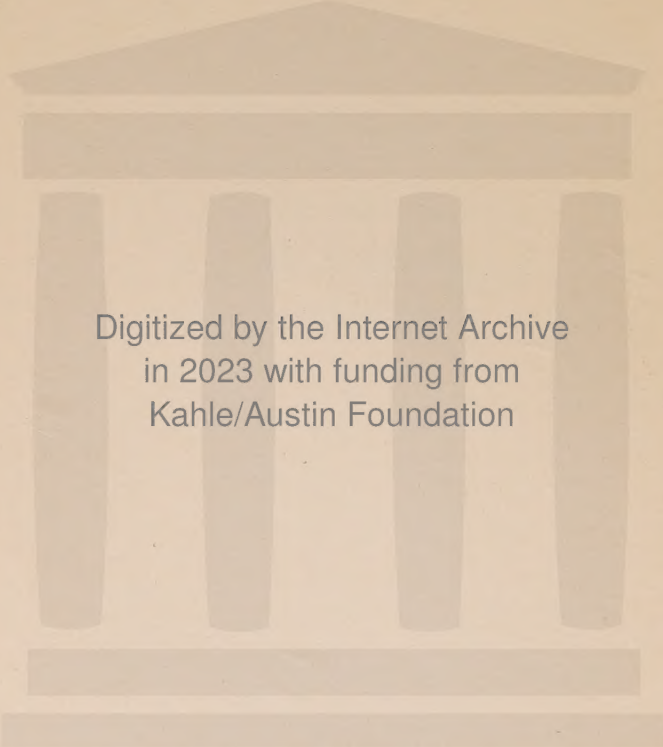
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CHAPTER ONE

*"Devant tant de sécheresse, Lucien tomba
dans une profonde rêverie."*

STENDHAL

"ONSIEUR ACHILLE," said the notary, "I am ready."

"We are listening, Maître Pelletot."

The notary settled his glasses more firmly and began the office of the day:

"On this fifteenth day of March in the year one thousand, nine hundred and nineteen, there appeared before me, Maître Albert Amédée Pelletot, notary of Pont-de-l'Eure, the following:

"Monsieur Achille Quesnay, manufacturer, of the Château de la Croix Saint-Martin, Pont-de-l'Eure;

"Monsieur Camille Marie Lecourbe, Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, manufacturer, of Pont-de-l'Eure;

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“Monsieur Antoine Pierre Quesnay, manufacturer, of Pont-de-l'Eure;

“And Lieutenant Bernard Quesnay, at present on active service with the fifteenth battalion of the Chasseurs à Pied.

“The aforesaid have agreed on the following articles and regulations of the partnership into which they are desirous of entering for carrying on the business of manufacturing and selling woollen fabrics under the style or firm of ‘Quesnay and Lecourbe.’ ”

Bernard Quesnay studied the scene as a connoisseur of painting.

Opposite him, his grandfather's face, a vivid pink beneath his white hair, stood out against the dark tapestry with the clear brilliance, the sharp outline of a Holbein. To the old man's right and left his son-in-law Lecourbe and the elder of his grandsons, Antoine, minor figures veiled in shadow, listened resigned to the notary's rigmarole. The monotonous throbbing of the looms in the mill made faces and hands tremble with a mechanical vibration, giving

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

these three men the passive appearance of machines.

“The decease of one or other of the partners shall not entail the dissolution of the partnership, which shall lawfully continue as between the surviving partners, and the widow or assignees of the deceased partner shall not be entitled to any payment over and above the sums placed to the account of the deceased at the stocktaking next preceding his disease.”

‘Nice talk,’ thought Bernard; ‘all it’s concerned with is our dying. . . However, the sacred fire must burn everlastingly beneath the boilers of the Family. This notary sets up one safeguard after the other, so that the continuation of the cult may be assured. . . What would Monsieur Achille do, if he knew he was condemned to die to-morrow? Without a doubt, he would dictate his letters and take the necessary steps for his “falling due” (as he would consider it).’

“The present partnership shall be constituted

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

for a duration of twenty years, as from the first day of July, one thousand, nine hundred and nineteen. In the event of voluntary liquidation . . .”

‘Maître Pelletot is my grandfather’s chaplain. . . . Here are we—for twenty years at peace with the gods; and here am I—for twenty years tied to this job. Am I doing right?’

“. . . Done at Pont-de-l’Eure, in the registered office of the firm, this fifteenth day of March, in the year one thousand, nine hundred and nineteen . . .”

‘Buying wool, selling cloth—this then is to be my life. . . My short and only life. . . In twenty years’ time, the game will be over, all hope of adventure lost, every chance of happiness gone. Every morning I shall go my round through the work-rooms; of an evening, in the office, I shall dictate: “In reply to your favour . . .” The worst of it is, that I shall not be un-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

happy. . . And what for? What compels me to sign?’

A heavy sadness enveloped him; he repeated to himself:

‘My short and only life . . . God! How ugly those painted windows are! And that blue stuff on the walls, edged with that red border, is just frightful. . . All the same, I ought to be listening. I am tying up my life by this deed and I can’t even get myself to take any interest in it. Uncle Lecourbe really is preposterous. Even when he isn’t doing anything he keeps his self-important look.’

“And, the deed having been duly read, the aforesaid have hereto appended their signatures with that of the notary . . .”

In pronouncing the last phrase Maître Pelletot’s voice rose like the scale run up by the last drops of water in filling a vase. He stood up.

“Monsieur Bernard, permit an old friend of your family to congratulate you on entering a business which has never ceased to expand and

to wish you that success, so richly deserved, which has always fallen to the share of your grandfather and your poor father.”

Already, in order to sign the deed, the old man had gone and sat down heavily in the arm-chair left vacant by the notary.

Monsieur Lecourbe, affable and solemn, stroking his square-cut beard, wished to explain the economic situation to Maître Pelletot. A great reader of financial reviews, he built up on shifting statistics theories which straightway came to grief. The magnificence of his mistakes detracted nowise from the authority of his prophecies.

“Trade,” said he, “is about to go through a long period of prosperity. That happens after every great war. As in 1815, as in 1871, the needs of Europe, crippled as she is, are immense.”

“Immense,” the notary agreed, sadly contemplating the shiny, greasy sleeves of his frockcoat.

“The foremost economists,” said Monsieur Lecourbe, stroking his beard, “predict that this period of fat kine will last for thirty years at

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

least. Consider, Maître Pelletot, that we have to set on their feet again the devastated regions of France, of Belgium, of Italy, not to mention Austria and Russia. Never before has such a task been presented to human activity."

Bernard and his brother Antoine exchanged a smile. Monsieur Lecourbe's eloquence amused them with the scientific form of its incoherence. His "up to a certain point and in a certain degree", his "in this connexion, but in another realm of thought" were famous in the family. The Quesnays, a rugged, taciturn race, could not get over their surprise at having admitted this chatterer to their counsels and bosoms.

"The stocks of wool," Monsieur Lecourbe continued, "have been exhausted, to make uniforms. In Japan . . ."

Monsieur Achille was listening impatiently to this futile speech. His bony, hairy hand made a swift turn, as if starting up an invisible machine. At this crude signal, this sharp reminder of the rights of machinery over man, his docile grandsons and son-in-law at once vanished, as if a powerful cable had dragged them off to the mill.

CHAPTER TWO

ONSIEUR ACHILLE, an old man of seventy-two (and very rich at that), went in for business as old Englishmen go in for golf, religiously. To his grandson's question: "Why spend a short life in manufacturing textiles?" he would doubtlessly have replied: "Why live and *not* manufacture them?" But all talk which did not deal with the technicalities of his business was, for him, mere negligible sound.

A descendant of farmers who had turned weavers in the days of the First Empire, Monsieur Achille preserved the traces of that peasant origin in an unappeasable lust for work and an incredible distrustfulness. His maxims astounded with their fierce contempt of mankind. He used to say: "Every deal put to me is a bad one, for if it wasn't it wouldn't be put." He

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

used to say also: “Nothing you don’t do yourself is ever done.” “All reports are false reports.”

The roughness of his retorts terrified the wool-brokers, whose hands shook as they opened their blue parcels before him. He did not believe that amiability and solvency were compatible virtues. If a customer tried flattery, he cut down his credit. With foreigners, whom he used to call “Natives,” without making any further distinction between Europeans and Kanakas, he refused all dealings.

Like all the great mystics, Monsieur Achille led an austere life. In his eyes, luxury was one of the first signs of indigence. In women he saw nothing but the fabrics in which they wrapped themselves. On his lips, a phrase like “I feel your dress: the stuff is very soft,”¹ would have been ingenuous, innocent of afterthought. Deprived of his clicking looms, he would have withered away at once. He grew old only on Sundays, and holidays would have killed him. His two sole passions were love of “business”

¹ “*Je tâte votre habit: L’étoffe en est moelleuse.*” Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Act III, Sc. 3.

and the hatred which he bore to Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, his fellow-mill-owner and competitor.

The high red roofs of the Quesnay mills towered over the country-town of Pont-de-l'Eure like a fortress over the country it protects. At Louviers, a small town only a few miles away, the Pascal Bouchet mills stood ranged on the bank of the Eure like so many broad-backed, gnarled cathedral-naves.

In the face of the imperial industry of the German "Kartels" this French industry of the days before the war remained feudal and quarrelsome. From their neighbouring strongholds the two manufacturers of the Valley waged a war of prices, wishing it were lethal.

A merchant who told Monsieur Achille that "Bouchet's price is lower" made him bring down his figure at once. An overseer of Monsieur Pascal's who announced "They want me at Quesnay's" got a rise at the end of the month. This feud cost the two rival houses dear. But Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, in this respect like Monsieur Achille, looked on business as a martial

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

sport and never spoke of the blows dealt him in each season's campaign except with pride.

"Pascal!" Monsieur Achille was wont to say after each stocktaking. "Pascal is a fool who will be ruined in two years."

He had been saying it for five-and-thirty years.

Monsieur Pascal dissimulated his equally violent feelings better. Younger and much less rustic than his hereditary enemy, he had that considerable classical culture proper to the French middle classes towards the close of the Second Empire, which he often used to compare with the "indigo base" without which no dye is "fast." His speeches, which he always adorned with Latin quotations, and his majestic presence had made him president of the Chamber of Commerce in Pont-de-l'Eure. He lived in style, had bought the charming *château* of Fleuré built for Agnès Sorel, possessed pictures, fine books, and hunted with the squireens of the Valley—frivolous tastes which his austere rival reprobated. The elder of his daughters, Hélène,

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

had married the Comte de Thianges, deputy for Pont-de-l'Eure in the Chamber.

In one another's despite, the war had brought Monsieur Achille and Monsieur Pascal together. In 1917, Françoise Pascal Bouchet had become the wife of Antoine Quesnay, who had been wounded and discharged—a diplomatic revolution more astounding than that which made France and England allies so few years after Fashoda.

After the reconciliation, these two old men, who had spent their long lives in patient attempts at ruining one another, found no greater pleasure than to meet of an evening at their children's house and there talk over the Heroic Age. Two formless heaps sunk in club chairs, each balancing the other on either side of the fireplace, after a curt enough commentary on the day's official *communiqué*, they immediately took up again the story of their textile warfare.

"Do you remember, Monsieur Pascal, those white flannels which you sold to Delandre at fifteen centimes below cost price?"

“I should think I do! I was in a hurry that day and forgot to add in the spinning. . . . But you, Monsieur Achille, will you explain how you were able to do that coating at five francs, of which Roch bought all those parcels?”

“I was *not* able to do it. I was throwing money away; but it vexed you a good deal, didn't it? . . . I thought so.”

Monsieur Achille rubbed his hands as he contemplated retrospectively the image of Monsieur Pascal's fury. Monsieur Pascal laughed a dignified laugh in his beautiful white beard. At hearing his whilom adversary describe the then invisible aspect of events which had so strongly stirred his passions, each of them found the lively intellectual satisfaction which opposing generals—provided they thought well of one another—would experience after the conclusion of peace in making mutual explorations of one another's systems of lines and communication-trenches; and the recollection of difficult times afforded these feudal barons some small consolation for the insipid prosperity of an industry bereft of competition.

CHAPTER THREE

"HORATIO: *Hail to your lordship!*

HAMLET: *I am glad to see you well.*"



HE throbbing of the looms stirred the air with gentle vibrations. Through the open windows you could see, above the steaming tops of the limes, the long orange roofs of the mill. The azured mist of a Normandy morning floated over the Antoinés' garden. Bernard relaxed his military soul. The suppleness of civilian clothes enchanted him.

"What a day!" he murmured as he dressed. "It would be jolly to get a horse and jump a few ditches."

Overtaken by the war at the age of twenty, in the army for almost seven years, he felt he would never now be a real Quesnay. Accustomed to consider as comrades or superior officers the beings in whom his grandfather had never seen

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

anything but a tradesman, a customer, or a "hand," he now classed them according to their courage and spirit, not, as a Quesnay should, by their credit or their work. Sometimes even he forgot that men were created for buying, wearing and selling textiles and caught himself envying the studious leisure of rich art-lovers.

In the 15th *Chasseurs* he had chosen for his closest friend a young writer, at that time a sergeant like himself, and he had spent a sedate, delicious leave in the little Paris flat which this Delamain inhabited. In a whitewashed room, furnished with a chair and a frame-bed, he had tasted the acute joys of voluntary poverty. Delamain had made him read Stendhal, very dangerous reading for a Quesnay, because it inculcates the hatred of boredom.

'If I had the will or merely good sense,' he thought as he knotted his tie, 'I would tell Monsieur Achille this very morning that I was going, and I would settle in Paris. I would go in for mathematics, history, riding and fencing, and I would see Simone every day. That would be happiness . . .'

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Bernard!" a woman's voice called from the garden.

He went to the window and saw his young sister-in-law on the sunlit lawn.

"Hello, Françoise, up already?"

"Already, Bernard? Why, it's ten o'clock. . . . Monsieur Achille will eat you. Antoine has been gone a long while. . . Come down and have breakfast with me. . . I have some had-dock for you, I know you like that."

"But how nice of you, Françoise. I shall be ready in a minute."

He finished dressing very quickly and joined her in the dining-room.

"How charming this is, this brownny-grey tablecloth of yours with the violet border and that basket of wisteria and acacia! I do admire your taste."

"The Pascal-Bouchet taste," she said, gaily and provocatively.

She had really brought into the Quesnay family, until then insensible to beautiful things, the Pascal-Bouchet taste extolled by the keepers of old furniture shops in Evreux and Nonancourt.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Bernard admired the rustic style of the wood-work, the ceiling with its black and white beams, the great opening on to the garden with its masses of bloom. But right at the back of his mind a Quesnay ancestor protested against this too perfect setting.

"But you are not looking at the most beautiful things of all. . . My Rouen ware. . . Admire that!"

"I will admire it this evening. . . You are right; I'm terribly late."

He swallowed his cup of tea at one gulp, jumped at one bound the six steps leading down from the house, careered like a child over the lawn, which sloped down to the town and the mill, and did not drop again to walking-pace until he was only ten yards off the Quesnay and Lecourbe works.

Monsieur Achille greeted him at the office by looking at his watch, a mute reproach. Monsieur Lecourbe, stroking his beard, square and grizzled after the style of President Carnot's, had the morning's letters passed over to the ex-soldier.

"You will find," said he, "trade first-rate and easy."

"Too easy," growled Monsieur Achille.

Absent-mindedly turning over the spread-out letters, Bernard beheld all the peoples of the earth humbly imploring the favour of buying. On the requests of "natives" Monsieur Achille had written in blue pencil: "No reply."

Bernard amused himself with guessing the psychology of these unknown people by the printing of the headings.

"Who is Jean Vanekem, gentleman-broker?"

"Vanekem?" said Monsieur Lecourbe with pride. "He is a second cousin of mine. He set up a commission-agency in 1916, and now he occupies a whole house in the Rue d'Hauteville. Now, that's a fellow with a first-class brain! He has an immense office, an office, my boy, as large as the Club here!"

Bernard, standing close to the window, was watching four men in the muddy yard, loading a dray with "pieces" of cloth. Not knowing that they were overlooked, they were joking and playing. One of them, however, noticed the

bosses, said something in a low voice and the whole group became businesslike and serious. Bernard sighed.

"And our relations with the hands?" he queried.

"First-rate," said Monsieur Lecourbe, stroking his beard with satisfaction.

Starting up his invisible machine with a turn of the wrist, Monsieur Achille dispatched his grandsons to the work-rooms.

Barrels of oil, bales of wool, bundles of yarn strewed in the mill yard. In the work-rooms, Bernard met again the smells so familiar to his childhood: the strong smell of greasy wool, the mawkish smell of wet steam. Familiar faces called forth with a rapidity that surprised him names forgotten for seven years.

"Hullo, Quibel, have you gone lame?"

"Yes, Monsieur Bernard, since the Somme. . . . When they took off my left boot, the foot came too."

"And what about you, Heurtematte?"

"Me, M'sieur Bernard? I was discharged after the Dardanelles."

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“O were you? That must have been a pretty warm spot, the Dardanelles?”

“It was no joke. But Cairo, that’s a fine town. Haven’t you been there? Women like in Paris.”

Through the spinning-room, where the great jennies slowly manœuvred their large squares of white yarn, they reached the burling-room, where a hundred women, seated at long tables, were drawing with tweezers straw and knots out of the wool. There the oldest and most loyal women in the mill fêted Bernard.

“Madame Petitseigneur! Madame Qui-mouche! How are you? How are you?”

“O M’sieur Bernard! So you’re back again, M’sieur Bernard?”

“This stuff doesn’t look too good, does it?”

“Aye, you may say it. It’s bad work, M’sieur Bernard. What we want is the work they sent us before the war. Now all they can do’s holiday-making.”

Behind these women, through the skylight, you could see the red roofs of the mill, the green water of the reservoirs, the river, a line drawn

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

by a bright blue paint-brush, gleaming through the silver poplars, farther away the soft curves of the violet hills. The building was lofty, and the movement of the looms imparted to it a gentle seesawing, so that the landscape danced.

CHAPTER FOUR

ONSIEUR ACHILLE installed his grandson in his private office, a dark cavern encumbered by account-books a century old, and entrusted to him the checking of cost-prices. In these calculations, the most esoteric rites of industrial magic, the profane would only have seen common problems in arithmetic; the initiate knew the part which inspiration played. The genius of the Quesnays—no less!—in a kind of holy delirium dictated to Monsieur Achille his sudden decision to forget the usual charges in order to snap up a tender coveted by Pascal Bouchet's or to raise his figure for weaving to insane heights in order to shun the dangerous favours of the "natives."

But Bernard, a vocationless novice, did not perceive the grandeur of his ministry. Before his eyes, the scaling bricks of a long building,

all windows, took up the horizon. On to the clicking of the looms, always perceptible in the trembling air, he embroidered the opening of the *Pastoral Symphony*; then, with a shake of his head, settled to work again.

‘12 kilos of warp at 56 francs . . . 672 francs
 . . . 14 kilos of weft at 27 francs . . . 378
 francs. Weaving: 82,000 picks at . . . at how
 much?’

He hummed the *Peasants’ Rondo*.

‘Delamain and his friends would still say that I have bad taste. But what does it matter to me that Beethoven repeats himself, if what he repeats gives me pleasure? No, it’s merely because he’s too rounded, too finished for them. . . . I can understand Stravinsky as well as they can, but that does not lessen Beethoven in any way. . . . And my costings . . . 82,000 picks. On Saturday Pierné is doing Wagner and they are playing Molière at the Vieux Colombier in the evening. I might have taken Simone. If I warned her in time, she could get rid of her husband. But that would mean leaving for Paris in the morning: fond hope! . . . the jolt-

ing of this table with the movement of the looms admonishes me to respect the laws of Pont-de-l'Eure. . . On the glass panes of the door Monsieur Cantaert—who doesn't look at all pleased with me—beats with redoubtable hand. And here is Monsieur Cantaert in his white blouse.'

Monsieur Cantaert, the head buyer, was harsh with his young employers.

"Monsieur Bernard, you absolutely must talk to Desmares, the head of your spinning department; the man's off his head: three adjustable spanners he's wanted of me in the last fortnight!"

"Monsieur Cantaert, I will tell him so."

"Yes, you'll have to tell him so. And then, Monsieur Bernard, I'd trouble you to cast an eye over this packing-paper account. I ask you—can you possibly use up a ton of paper in ten days, when . . ."

"Monsieur Cantaert, the packers are criminals, and I'll let them know it."

"What I tell you, Monsieur Bernard, is in the interests of the firm. You look bored when I

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

mention such details to you, but they're important all the same, they are."

"To be sure, Monsieur Cantaert."

"By the saving for which I'm responsible, I make my salary twice over. But to keep a firm hand, I must be backed up by the boss."

"You shall be, Monsieur Cantaert."

Monsieur Cantaert's white blouse disappeared round an archway. Bernard concentrated his attention and plunged into the costings-book.

'82,000 picks at 60 centimes, plus 10 centimes cost-of-living bonus . . . 65 francs. Burling, warping, sizing . . . 50 francs. . .' "Come in!"

Crimson with fury, Monsieur Desmares came in.

"Monsieur Bernard, is it true that you told Cantaert to slate me for wastage of tools?"

"It would be more exact to say, Monsieur Desmares, that Monsieur Cantaert came to me to complain. . ."

"Monsieur Bernard, if you have no confidence in me, all I can do is to throw up the management of your spinning department. I don't eat adjustable spanners; if I ask for them, it's be-

❧❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧❧

cause I want them. That fellow Cantaert! I'll have nothing more to do with him!"

"Monsieur Desmares, you will only have to do with me."

"From you, Monsieur Bernard, I will take anything. But from him! . . ."

Tranquillized, he departed. The young man sighed.

'Governing men is a difficult business. To succeed in it you must be completely lacking in rigidity and obstinacy. The psychology of these heads of departments is the same as that of the heroes in Homer. The most useful book for an industrial magnate is not Taylor's Ready Reckoner, but the *Characters* of La Bruyère. After substituting the pursuit of wealth for the pursuit of court-preferment, the chapter "Of the Court" would become a first-rate "Of Business." . . . In five minutes, Monsieur Achille will want that price of his from me. . . Dyeing . . . 22 kilos at 6 francs . . . 132 francs. Dressing . . . 50 francs. . . . General charges. . . . O! Who is it now? . . .' "Come in!"

There were two timid knocks.

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"Come in!" he called louder. "Come in, for the Lord's sake!"

Trembling hands with difficulty turned the door-handle. Five old women entered: gnarled hands folded on their black aprons, honest faces pale with emotion. This Chorus of Suppliant Women formed itself into a line and stopped to take breath.

"Madame Petitseigneur? Madame Qui-mouche? What can I do for this deputation from the burling-room?"

"M'sieur Bernard, we've come to you, because we daren't go to Monsieur Achille. I hope you'll not be vexed, sir, with us for coming to have a word with you the very day after you're back—but we can't go on, nohow. It's the country folk, M'sieur Bernard, it's the country folk who's ruining us. You go up to Pont-de-l'Eure market; a rabbit'll cost you four francs and five sous; peas, why you can't even think of them! The more you pay us, the dearer things get. The weavers, they get their eighty, their hundred francs, but us, we're always victimized. Us in the burling-room, we're all more

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

or less widow-women, but it's necessary for the manufacture, M'sieur Bernard . . .”

He smiled at them, embarrassed; their anxious good faith was evident. He would have liked to distribute among them riches which would have astonished and delighted them, but the shade of Monsieur Achille, formidable and watchful, floated in the steam of the boilers that dimmed the office windows. He uttered some vague phrases: he had only just got back, hadn't picked up the threads yet, would have to consult his grandfather.

“Why, of course, M'sieur Bernard, take your time. Don't worry, we won't leave the mill and go out on strike, we won't. . . We're not for playing the fool in the streets.”

Hands folded on their black aprons, the Chorus of Suppliant Women departed.

CHAPTER FIVE



SINCE the death of his wife, Monsieur Achille dined every Sunday with the Antoinés. He said little beyond two or three witticisms addressed to Françoise at the expense of her Pascal-Bouchet taste. After dinner he would smoke a cigar while casting hostile glances at certain objects he hated more than others: a green Sedan chair, the model of a frigate, an old barometer. The soft mauves of the Jouy hangings on the walls, the subdued straw-coloured curtains at the windows seemed to diffuse a luminous serenity in the drawing-room.

Antoine used to read *Le Consulat et l'Empire* or mend bells and electric-light plugs; he was happy only in the company of Thiers, Taine, M. de Tocqueville, or with a screwdriver or hammer in his hand. At the works, he lived in the engi-

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

neering shop, inventing ingenious little improvements for the machinery. In his grandfather's presence, he seemed embarrassed and as if on the defensive. He looked at him every now and then; he saw that the old man was thinking: 'What a drawing-room for my grandson, and what a wife!'—and suffered a little, in silence.

Françoise, absent-mindedly striking chords, would look at them in sad astonishment, which two years' experience had not mitigated. The dismal life of the Quesnays stifled her. In her father's house at Fleuré such evening gatherings were almost always gay and lively; there were guests and games, reading aloud or music. But, outside working hours, these Quesnays were like machinery out of gear. They were waiting for the moment they returned to the mill and only awoke to a spark of life when one of them called to mind some forgotten trifle: a dissatisfied customer, a sick hand, a spoilt piece of cloth.

'How different Antoine was while we were engaged!' Françoise thought. 'But he was an officer in those days and hardly saw his grand-

father; he looked from a distance and with indifference at this mill, which I detest. He had time for thinking about me. He used to lend me books and explain them to me. He was nice and affectionate.'

She called to mind their trysts on the riverbank, half-way between Pont-de-l'Eure and Louviers. At that time she was very proud of reconciling the Montagues and Capulets of the Valley. Antoine had given her a lovely edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, bound in violet doe-skin and dedicated "To Juliet." She had always loved the "parma" colour. Only two years ago—and that delicious enthusiasm had brought her to evenings like this! Her fingers, softly gliding over the keys, sketched out an air of Schumann's.

"The roses, the lilies, the sun and the doves . . .'" Bernard hummed and smiled at her.

He got up, sat down at Monsieur Achille's side and retailed to him the burlers' visit.

"After all," he wound up, "they're in the right."

"They're in the right!" growled Monsieur

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Achille. “That’s easy enough to say. . . Everybody’s in the right.”

“We’re not concerned with everybody,” said Bernard, rather nervous. “If you grant these women twenty centimes per hour, the earth will still go round.”

“Twenty centimes per hour per hand,” said Monsieur Achille, “comes to a million francs at the end of the year.”

“But again,” said Bernard, “we are not concerned with the whole mill.”

“You cannot raise some,” said Antoine, relinquishing Thiers, “without raising others. The hierarchy of labour is sacrosanct. A fine-drawer asks more than a burler, a spinner than a weaver.”

“But why?” said Bernard. “They have the same stomachs, the same needs.”

“There is no Why,” said Monsieur Achille, shrugging his shoulders. “That’s how it is.”

It struck nine. He got up. He never said Good-bye to anyone. Antoine went with him as far as the gate. Bernard remained alone with his sister-in-law; pivoting on the piano-stool,

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

rather after the manner of Youth Set Free, she looked at him with a smile of friendship, almost of complicity. She had hardly known him before the war, but had seen him frequently since the armistice had made leave easy to obtain. She inspired in him a rather queer feeling, a mixture of admiration, of sympathy, and of fear. Fear of what? He couldn't have told. She always seemed on the verge of taking him for her confidant; it was that perhaps which he dreaded. He was very loyal to his brotherly faith. Moreover, once more, confidant about what? Antoine worshipped his wife; he was a perfect husband.

"Well, Bernard, how are you getting on?" she said, in English.

She had been brought up by an English governess and had always spoken English with her sisters. For her it was the language of mystery, of intimacy. Bernard, who had spent a year in London, liked using it too, and that had brought them together. Antoine understood English also, but with more difficulty.

"Well," said Bernard, "I am trying to accus-

“ Bernard Quesnay “

tom myself again to the ways of Pont-de-l'Eure. It isn't much fun.”

“Fun?” she said indignantly. “O no, Pont-de-l'Eure is no fun. And yet I was a bit prepared for it. Louviers is not so far off, and not so different. But you—if you marry a Paris girl, I shall pity her.”

“You will have no one to pity, Françoise; set your mind at rest, I shall certainly never marry.”

“What do you know about it?”

“Are you discreet? Can you keep a secret?”

“It is no secret, my poor Bernard; everybody here knows that you have a *liaison* and that you can be seen about Paris with a woman—a very handsome woman too. But a *liaison* doesn't last for ever.”

“No, that's perfectly true—because I am mortal myself; but it will last for as long as she wants.”

“Really?” said Françoise, excited and happy. “So you love her very much? Is she beautiful?”

“What do you expect me to answer? I am a partial witness. But, honestly, since I have

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

known her, I have never met a woman comparable to her, except perhaps you, Françoise . . . No, that's not a silly compliment—she is like you. I have often thought, how strange it is that the two Quesnay brothers should be in love with two women of the same type! Only, Simone has something daring about her which you have not got. In you, sweet resignation is rather the dominant trait.”

‘Do I give the appearance of sweet resignation?’ Françoise asked herself curiously. ‘I feel myself so little resigned. I should like . . .’ “But, Bernard,” she said, “why don’t you marry her?”

“Firstly, because she is married. And then—I don’t believe in marriage.”

Françoise was looking at him, leaning forward with her elbow resting on her knee and her chin in her hand. It was her habitual attitude in reverie.

‘(Does he write to her? Every day? Can a Quesnay be romantic? Why at this moment have I the impression of being frustrated? Antoine loves no one but me. The only drawback

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

is that I am bored . . .)' "But I am sorry for that," she said aloud, "I was counting on you to get me a harem-companion. You know, there's quite a conspiracy here to make you marry the Lecourbe girl, your cousin . . ."

"Yvonne? But she's a little girl, isn't she? I haven't seen her for years. My last remembrance of her is seesawing with her in the Lecourbe's garden. She was very heavy."

"She isn't a little girl now. She is nineteen and quite exceptional. She knows all sorts of difficult things, has taken her matriculation and is reading for a degree in English. At the moment, she's at Oxford. . . Queer, isn't it? . . . the two Lecourbe children have brains. Roger too is doing wonders at the university."

"But after all," said Bernard, "they are half Quesnays . . . And what is she like? Pretty? Ugly?"

"That's hard to say; she has nice points, but she is very 'robust.' She goes in terrifically for games, you know; I think she is overdeveloping certain muscles. Intellectually, she has an air of authority that frightens me."

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"What a portrait!" he said, laughing. "And she is destined for me?"

Antoine came into the room. His hands were black with motor-grease.

"I beg your pardon," said he, "I have been down to the garage. The car went up the hill very badly this evening and I wanted to have a look at her with Charles."

"And what was the matter?" asked Bernard.

"The petrol-feed was faulty."

For some time they discussed questions of air-mixture; then Bernard said Good night.

"Not much changed, Bernard," said Antoine, when he was alone with his wife. "When he was ten years old, during a strike, he asked: 'Grandfather, if I sold my bicycle, could you give them what they want?'"

"That was very sweet of him," said Françoise. "And what did your grandfather answer?"

"He told the story for ten years:—I never could make out whether from pride or contempt."

"I should like to know," said Françoise reflect-

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

tively, as she began undressing, "I should like to know whether he, Bernard I mean, will be happy here after his long absence."

"He will have to be," said Antoine, looking at her a little uneasily.

Before going to bed, he spent a long time mending the hot-water tap of the bath. Françoise read a novel and, from time to time, looked at the clock.

CHAPTER SIX



HANKS to Bernard's firmness, the burlers were raised; the fine-drawers followed; the weavers, whose higher wages had annoyed the other classes of labour, in their turn put in a claim; for it was an important matter to preserve the ancient hierarchy of the callings and the distances between them.

The raising of wages once more carried with it a rise in the price of fabrics. Bernard Quesnay was commissioned to go to Paris and inform the customers of the firm of Quesnay and Lecourbe.

Old memories made him dread this mission. Before the war customers—august beings of whom one only spoke with respectful awe—imposed without difficulty their cruel caprices on an industry, divided and always starved for work. At the least sign of rebellion a Quesnay

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

would see himself threatened with a Pascal Bouchet. A complicated diplomacy, sacrifice and prayer were necessary in those days for pacifying their ferocious taskmasters.

“Times have changed, Monsieur Bernard,” said old Monsieur Perruel, the Quesnays’ Paris representative.

And so it turned out. Monsieur Roch, of the house of Roch and Lozeron, whom Monsieur Bernard feared more than any other—he used to buy every year more than one-third of the Quesnays’ output—received him with a meekness altogether novel in that man of wrath. Monsieur Roch’s office was a kind of cube of planks, scarcely furnished, which hid itself with a sort of shame behind piles of stuffs mounting up to the ceiling. This warehouse had been built to accommodate stuffs, and in it cloth forcefully asserted its predominance over mind.

“My dear Bernard,” said Monsieur Roch to him, “(I can very properly address you so, I was on friendly enough terms with your poor father) my dear Bernard, I am not haggling with you, I shall never haggle with you . . . But more

than fifteen francs I cannot pay you for riding-habits . . .”

“Our workpeople demand a rise, Monsieur Roch; we have to satisfy everybody. . .”

“No, my dear Bernard, not everybody. . . Never throw over old friends. Ah, if your poor father were still alive, I am very certain I should get my thousand pieces for fifteen francs. I can still see him, your poor father—sitting on the chair you are on and dressed in that great black overcoat which he never left off. . . Ah, he had the business-instinct, and that, you know—either you have or have not got it! . . . Come now, I will go down and see Monsieur Achille at Pont-de-l’Eure, and we shall come to an understanding, I make no doubt; we shall always come to an understanding in the end, your grandfather and I.”

Monsieur Roch deeply depressed Bernard, who felt him impenetrable and powerful. He sighed as he walked away from his place.

Monsieur Delandre, of the house of Delandre and Company, gave a description of the manufacturers’ dictatorship:—

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"I telephone to Lapoutre at three in the afternoon and ask the price for a little gabardine; they quote me 13 francs 32. I wait for my partner to come in and ask him: 'Must we close at that?' 'Yes, telephone again. . . Now the figure's 13 francs 47' . . . Why? That's how things are!—But the worst of autocrats is your friend Pascal Bouchet. He gives you an appointment for the twenty-third of July at 9:45; you are shown into a little office; at the stroke of 9:45 Monsieur Bouchet comes in. If you are on time, he says to you: 'Monsieur Delandre, I have allotted 48 pieces to you at 29 francs. Here is a pattern-book; I give you quarter of an hour for choosing your patterns.' A quarter of an hour later he comes in again and you have got to be ready. That's present-day business: you must own that it is preposterous."

Monsieur Perruel then took him to Cavé Brothers, who exported materials for Algiers and Tunis.

"The price doesn't much matter," said Monsieur Cavé senior; "what we need, Monsieur Quesnay, is a heavy, well-gummed cloth to re-

place the article which the Austrians used to make before the war for Arab burnouses."

"We could make it," said Bernard, "but at the moment we have so much work in hand. . ."

"There you go! Always the same!" Monsieur Cavé cried in his indignation. "I often used to say to your father: 'All you are capable of doing at your mill is staring at your own navels.'"

"Upon my soul, Monsieur Cavé, that would perhaps be the best thing we could do. The sages of India used to find keen enough pleasure in gazing at theirs, so they say."

Monsieur Perruel gave his employer a nudge with his elbow. As they went away, he took him to task:—

"Monsieur Bernard, you ought to take your customers seriously all the same. At the present moment you don't need them, but that may yet happen. Besides—if my years authorize me to give you advice—don't talk so much. There is always too much talking in business. The foremost salesman of the place, here in Paris, is an Englishman. He never says any-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

thing but ‘Good morning’ and ‘Good-bye.’ He comes in with his case: ‘Good morning.’ He spreads out his samples, slowly, before his customer. When you say ‘No,’ he packs up. When you give an order, he books it. He doesn’t argue, he doesn’t plead. He is a very smart fellow. The funniest thing is that he comes from Montmartre and does not know any English. Another thing: you always want me to tell customers the truth. Monsieur Bernard, customers do not like the truth.”

“Alas, Monsieur Perruel, no one likes the truth!”

“Customers think they know all about it, Monsieur Bernard; you must leave them with that illusion.”

He took him to the region of nobler houses. The Place des Victoires, the Rue Etienne-Marcel, the Rue Réaumur, the Rue Vivienne bounded the ancient fastness of the draper-aristocracy.

There noble merchants and their prudent, athletic sons held sway; on to their oaken ceilings Bernard would have liked to paint Courtesy and

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Friendship coaxing a smile from Commerce. Having explored the Fastness of Drapery all day, he remembered towards evening that he had promised his uncle Lecourbe to look up Monsieur Jean Vanekem.

This great man's offices were furnished in the Directoire style. Through a half-open door you could see other offices, fair-haired typists—all pretty—and calculating-machines, gleaming in red and black japan.

Monsieur Vanekem, a very young man with his hair brushed back and an altogether American zestfulness, received the provincial Quesnay with a mixture of good grace and superiority.

“You will pardon me a second?” said he. “It is the time for my meeting with my heads of departments.”

He proceeded to turn rapidly the handle of a small house-telephone, issuing orders in curt tones.

“Monsieur Perrin, conference . . . Monsieur Durand, conference . . . Monsieur Chicard, conference . . . Monsieur Meyer, conference . . .”

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Through the three doors into the office there streamed in men in black morning-coats, magnificent and deferential.

“Statistics A,” Monsieur Vanequem called out. “Hungary? . . .” “2,000 metres, sir.” “England? . . .” “5,000 metres, sir.” “Rumania? . . . You see,” he observed to Bernard, “I know every day exactly what has been sold during the day, what I still have in stock in the different countries and the total of my commitments to the manufacturers. It is all mathematics.”

‘Yes,’ thought Bernard admiringly, ‘this is your true man of affairs. Perhaps I might take a liking to this calling if I had not to follow it in that second-rate office down at Pont-de-l’Eure, where Monsieur Desmares and Monsieur Cantaert have feuds over an adjustable spanner.’

“Who,” asked Monsieur Vanequem, “looks after the Banat of Temesvar?”

When the chorus of statisticians had left the stage, Bernard timidly brought forward Monsieur Lecourbe’s petition.

“Help you to find capital for starting a dye-stuffs plant? Child’s play, my dear sir! . . .

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

How much do you want? Two million? . . . Ah, that's a more difficult proposition. A capital of two million, you will understand, hardly interests the banks . . . Ask me for ten, twenty, thirty million, and you shall have them to-morrow . . . But two! However, I will see what I can do . . . Will you dine with me, Monsieur Quesnay? We will talk about that business of yours again; I am only waiting for a friend of mine, Liliane Fontaine, an actress who is not yet very well known, but has a great deal of talent."

"But I know about her!" said Bernard. "She came and played *Hernani* at home in the country. I shall be very pleased to come."

CHAPTER SEVEN



ADEMOISELLE LILIANE FONTAINE wore her hair drawn back and perfectly flat, had fine black eyes, rather a thin bust and a lemon-yellow handkerchief tied round her right wrist. Bernard told her how he had admired her when she played Doña Sol on tour at Pont-de-l'Eure.

"Pont-de-l'Eure? . . . I should think so. The Silver Kid Hotel? And the dirt of it! . . . And that audience of old ladies with real lace fichus, medallions, violet dresses and mantles. In the gods workmen convulsed with laughter . . ."

"I must confess," said Bernard, "that the audiences of Pont-de-l'Eure are not very romantic. . . . But they found you excellent. It was the leading man who made them laugh."

"Now, who was that? O yes, Ponroy . . . the old fellow who used to be at the Odéon. He

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

certainly is a sentimental and melodramatic actor. And he spurtles! You may imagine how nice it is to have to harmonise ‘You are my lion, proud and generous’ with ‘How I wish you wouldn’t spit in my face!’ . . . Ponroy is one of the old-fashioned sort who take an interminable time over everything and give significance to every phrase. It is awful. I have played *Le Cid* with him as Don Diègue. He left me at his feet for an hour; you simply don’t know what to do.”

Bernard liked this green-room chatter. As he listened to it, the throbbing of the looms which still rumbled in his head seemed to die away to nothing more than a low sougling of muffled violins. Monsieur Achille, taciturn and uncouth, Monsieur Lecourbe, solemn and pedantic, Monsieur Cantaert and Monsieur Desmares, brothers at feud—all these highly coloured figures that floated through his melancholy reveries—grew dim, the far-away characters of some Balzacian *Scènes de la vie de province*.

“Look,” said Mademoiselle Fontaine, “there’s Sorel. . . Over there in the corner the Spanish

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

infante with his two old ladies. . . And Suzanne Caruel with her Greek."

Bernard looked about him. At the table on the right two couples, talking very loud, were endeavouring to astound each other by bandying Rolls-Royces, Delages, Monets and Corots. At the table on the left two men, by themselves, were preparing a deal. "Now listen closely to me, old man: the Hungarian crown is worth three centimes. For ten million crowns I can obtain the concession for a gaming-house on Lake Balaton. Over there, you can attract . . ."

"And our bit of business?" said Monsieur Vanequem to Bernard. "I've thought it over. After all, there's no reason why the capital should be limited to two million."

"Well, you see," said Bernard, "we have next to no liquid resources . . . Wool is so dear . . ."

"What?" said Monsieur Vanequem, surprised. "You mean to put your own money into this business? Never do that, my dear man . . . No, form a little company with a capital of six million: three in founders' shares, which you and

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

I will hold between us. The public will subscribe the rest. . . Take the business of mine for the import of coco-nuts—when I started it I fixed the capital at ten million, though I had neither ships nor plantations. . . We did very well without.”

Bernard, musing, admired the poetical genius of Monsieur Vanekem, who, out of ideal plantations and chimerical coco-nut-trees, knew how to extract real necklaces for the graceful neck of Mademoiselle Fontaine. The orchestra played the *Relicario*: between the tables couples danced cheek to cheek. With the jade fringe of her whirling skirt a very beautiful woman, her eyes half closed as if in a swoon, grazed a crystal glass which gave forth a sweet, soft sound. The monotonous rhythm of the violins obsessed Bernard, so that he fancied he heard, like a melancholy appeal, the far-away throbbing of his looms. Music always saddened him, by filling him with an acute sensation of the flight of time. The melancholy cynicism of the beings all around him shocked his ancestral Quesnay Puritanism.

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

Monsieur Vanekem, who knew the two men at the table to the left, had leaned over to them and begun a professional conversation. Bernard turned to Mademoiselle Fontaine's charming face.

"Do you not find," he said to her, "that music, even of the vulgarest kind, always inspires a desire for solitude? . . . How artificial this life is! Would you not like to live on some far-off island, in Fiji or Tahiti, where machines were unknown and money without power, but where happy, naked savages danced in a heavenly tropical climate?"

"*'Mon enfant, ma sœur, songe à la douceur d'aller là-bas vivre ensemble . . .'* It can be sung too."

"Are you making fun of me? The moment I find myself, as now, surrounded by smart women, crystal lustres, over-fed men, I experience immediately that 'something bitter which emanates from joys.' I have seen too many unhappy people."

"Are you a Bolshevik?" she asked.

"O no," Bernard protested vigorously, "I have

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

the strongest class-loyalty; my ideal is the primitive Roman senate, or some few English conservatives who have a very strong sense of their duties. . . But I am a fool and am boring you."

"O no," she said, "but for me only one thing really exists: the theatre. All the rest . . ."

At that moment Mademoiselle Fontaine's fine black eyes lit up:

"Look at that boy coming in," said she to Bernard. "Isn't he good-looking? Chérubin to the life. I should like to get him to play *Le Mariage de Figaro* with me on tour this summer. But the infant won't hear of it. His dream is *Polyeucte*. It's enough to make you die with laughing."

"A cigar?" Monsieur Vanequem suggested, proffering his case. "Fancy, among the American war-stocks I came across some marvellous Laranagas . . ."

CHAPTER EIGHT



VISIT of Monsieur Roch's to Pont-de-l'Eure was ordered in accordance with an invariable and meticulous ritual. At ten o'clock Monsieur Achille's victoria (he never could make up his mind to replace his old coachman by a chauffeur) went to the station. When the carriage drew up at the door, Monsieur Achille assumed an air of indifference and attentively studied a badly balanced pile of cloth.

"Ah, it is Monsieur Roch," he used to say, in a tone as if he had expected that day twenty personages of the same importance.

"Never get a day older, Monsieur Achille," Monsieur Roch replied with artificial good humour.

The visitor took a seat at one side of the table, Monsieur Achille at the other, and they

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

would talk of the past and of their young days for a space of time which, according to the observations of Antoine, that man of precision, varied between twenty-five and thirty-five minutes. The same anecdotes were reeled off several times *per annum*. The first time that Bernard attended this entertainment he had marvelled that a man as sparing of his speech and time as his grandfather should waste the one and the other in conversations all the more futile in that they were always identical. In pondering over them, he had realized that they played the same part as passes with the *muleta* before the eyes of a bull fresh from the *toril*; their aim was to surprise and tire the beast and to draw out the fight. There was no train for Monsieur Roch to catch before four in the afternoon. His decision would not be taken until five minutes before his departure. It was essential to avoid bringing the steel into play.

About half an hour after his arrival, Monsieur Lecourbe had instructions to make his entry. He served the same purposes as the *picador's* horse, a wretched creature foredoomed to defeat, and

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

the clown in a circus, who by the comicality of his antics produces a gay and sympathetic atmosphere. Monsieur Roch took great pleasure in his demonstrating, in the name of the foremost economists, contradictory theories before him.

As soon as the *picador*, his belly gored, beat a retreat, Monsieur Achille gave the sign to the darters of *banderillos*. Antoine and his brother were entrusted with this operation. They had to take Monsieur Roch for a walk through the mill.

“My grandson,” Monsieur Achille would say, “would like to show you a new machine.”

“Yes,” Antoine responded, “your opinion would be very valuable to me, Monsieur Roch.”

“I know, my boy,” Monsieur Roch said, “that I owe that to your poor father. Ah, I still see him, your poor father, with that great black overcoat of his . . .”

An hour later Antoine brought him back, worn out and sated for a year to come with gearing, cams, eccentric-wheels, almost ripe for the *stoccado*.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Lunch was served at Monsieur Achille's and always excellent. No allusion was ever made to the day's real objective. Françoise was there—which put a surprise-attack out of the question. She began by making a great effort to be agreeable and then gave up. She was blind to what Bernard called the 'Balzac side' of Monsieur Roch, an ex-commercial-traveller, who, become head of his business through the sudden death of his two employers, lacked culture but not subtlety. As soon as lunch was over, she cast off all constraint.

"I have done what you told me to, Bernard, I have re-read *Anna Karenina*. I can understand Anna's suicide very well. If Vronsky had been very cruel, and not good, she would not have killed herself."

"You are talking about the theatre?" said Monsieur Roch. "Personally, I do not like present-day plays, but I am fond of going to the Comédie Française to see *L'Ami Fritz* or *Monsieur Poirier*.¹ It isn't naughty like the Palais

¹ As who would say *Caste* and *The Rivals*.—TRANS.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Royal, but it's good and gives you something to think about."

Françoise became reckless.

"Bernard," she said in English, "let's walk round the garden. He's too boring. I can't stand it."

"Be careful. He might speak English."

"Certainly not. Just look at him."

With a look Antoine besought his wife to keep calm. Monsieur Achille, without understanding, divined danger, inwardly cursed the Pascal Bouchets and proposed that they should return to the mill on foot.

The two old men walked in front, blowing a little. Antoine and Bernard followed, admiring the reeds which massed their waving tufts at the bends of the river. Antoine thought how, when he was engaged, he had walked there with Françoise. That year she had worn a tussore frock which had a blue foulard collar with white spots. How lovely he had thought her! . . . He thought her still as lovely, but what strange bashfulness prevented him from continuing to tell her so? Often he disapproved of what she

“ Bernard Quesnay “

did and said, and that he dared not tell her either. Why had she taken up that attitude during lunch? That very morning he had begged her to control herself. She was dangerous. He loved her.

Monsieur Achille continued to withhold the steel until the moment when the rolling up of the victoria announced that the time of the visitor's train was drawing near. Then he curtly rapped out the "bottom price" he had been keeping in reserve since morning, and Monsieur Roch, agreeably surprised, drew from his pocket an order-book. Bernard took him down to the station and returned pondering somewhat sadly over the banality of the day.

'What a farce!' he thought. 'Is it necessary? One ought to run a mill as one commands a regiment, without subterfuge and without self-abasement. This all might be so simple and even grand. What need have we of a Roch? Françoise had an attack of nerves. I don't wonder . . . If I could persuade Simone to marry me, how would she endure Pont-de-l'Eure?'

Without knowing why, he had a vision of the

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

little violet mules which she wore in the evenings on the only trip they had ever gone on together. Before going to sleep, she put them in front of the bed, symmetrical and neat, as in Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*.

'Simone's mules under Monsieur Achille's roof. . . . O, it's not possible. The pity of it!'

He thought of the linguistic crazes she had. She used "authentic" when she meant "sincere," and it was from her that he had caught the trick of employing the term "side." She would, for instance, have spoken of Antoine's "Louis XVI side" and of Françoise's "Marie Antoinette side." Another of her crazes was to talk music in the language of the studio and painting in musical language. She used "rhythm" and "sonorousness" to describe a landscape. All that gave Bernard much pleasure. The carriage drew up. They had reached the mill.

"Did he look pleased?" asked Monsieur Achille.

CHAPTER NINE



ALLED to Paris by Monsieur Vanekem, Bernard felt a wish to see Delamain again. He had not given him warning, but knew him for a stay-at-home. A carriage smelling of mouldy cloth took him to Montsouris. A tiny narrow staircase climbed from floor to floor. He rang, in great fear of not finding his friend in.

After a minute, however, he heard steps. Delamain himself opened the door and did not seem surprised to see him.

"Hullo! So it's you. I am glad. . . Come in."

"I am not disturbing you, am I?"

"I am working, but it's nothing of consequence."

To Bernard the small room in which Delamain was writing seemed an enviable asylum, a for-

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

bidden dream. Standing up with his back against the mantelpiece, he looked at his friend with pleasure. Both smiled, to express a good will which words would have falsified. Bernard admired the sheets covered with a firm handwriting. Knowing that Delamain did not like small-talk, he talked to him about his work.

"What are you busy with at the moment? I have seen your article on Sainte-Beuve. It is very good. . . . Have you read this Proust they're talking of now? . . . Personally, I like the man a lot."

"Yes," said Delamain, "it is wholesome reading . . . What, for instance, is there left of jealousy after Swann? A morbid curiosity, without love . . . And how true that is!"

"Do you still see Denise?"

Delamain nodded affirmatively.

"And you, old chap?" he said. "What are you up to in those provinces of yours? Your works are at Pont-de-l'Eure, aren't they? Is trade good?"

"Trade is very good, but it is all one to me . . . My grandfather has been at work

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

for fifty years; what happiness has he? I don't like this job of mine, Delamain. The workpeople, whom I actively endeavour to give a square deal, mistrust me, and that is natural enough. In the eyes of the statesman and bureaucrat, the employer of labour is a parasite, making a fortune out of the exertions of others. No one sees his difficulties. No one considers his function. You yourself, I am sure . . . It's intolerable. And then you do not know what business is. It's very hard, almost impossible, to avoid crooked ways . . .”

“For instance?” said Delamain briefly.

“Well, for instance—a customer asks you your bottom price; you honestly quote it him . . . Do you think he appreciates your good faith and refrains from bargaining? Not a bit of it. He presumes *a priori* that you are deceiving him. That's putting it mildly: he is furious if you stick to your point. That kind of thing exasperates me.”

Delamain gently shrugged his shoulders.

“It seems to me,” said he, “that you are worrying about nothing. All human relationships

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

are governed by conventions. If it is one of them that ‘bottom price’ in reality means ‘bottom-but-one,’ all you can do is to accept it. You are working yourself up over scruples, Quesnay; confessors do not like that.”

Bernard opened his hands as a sign of helplessness and then, pointing to the outspread papers, said:

“What will the book be about?”

“O, an arid enough subject . . . The Resurrection of Freedom. I shall describe the generation before ours, crushed by too oppressive a fatalism: terrified by Darwin, that mystifier of genius; inflamed by Marx, another of the same kidney. And I hope to show that their ‘iron laws’ are nothing but hallucinations which fade away if you will it with sufficient force. . . I do not know if it is very clear to you. In short, I want to show that freedom and determinism are true at one and the same time, are not contradictory. Do you follow?”

“Yes; but I do not think you are right. Now, in my particular case—my sensation at the present moment is that of being crushed by a

mechanism stronger than myself. This overwhelming rise in prices, these changes in wage-rates, this wealth which is bursting our coffers—what influence can I have over all these things? It's the flowing tide; it's the tide-race. . . . What can a swimmer do? And a bad swimmer at that? On the other hand, to clear out, leave the mill, in order to do what I want, when all my means are derived from it—that would strike me as something base. Don't you think so?"

Delamain put back a log into the fire, then raised it with the tongs so that the flame could get better hold.

"I tell you again," said he, "it seems to me that in all this you mingle too much moral solicitude. Where action is concerned, we must conform to custom. The individual cannot put everything in question. And moreover, are you sure you are not transforming into ethical pre-occupations what, at bottom, is nothing but pride? There is an almost-virtue which consists in saying to oneself: 'I am so virtuous that I cannot practise my virtue in the framework of

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

society.’ In that case one holds aloof. It is convenient.”

“Perhaps,” said Bernard meditatively. “Everything is very difficult.”

“The essential thing,” said Delamain, “is to keep your spirit free. Haven’t you a little love-affair to make you forget Pont-de-l’Eure?”

“On the contrary,” said Bernard, “I have a big love-affair which makes me hate Pont-de-l’Eure. Do you remember Simone Beix?”

“That handsome woman who was about in Châlons in March ’18? The wife of the Railway Transport Officer . . . Rather! She was delightful. At one and the same time she looked like Joshua Reynolds’s angels and that delicious Russian dancer, Lydia Lopokova, you know. She certainly took a fancy to you. Do you still see her? Do you love her?”

“I do not know,” said Bernard, suddenly talking very fast. “I think her very pretty, of course, and she is intelligent, rather in the ‘high-brow’ way. She is very ‘*Nouvelle Revue Française*’-y, like you, more advanced even, and in music very ‘*Groupe des Six*’-y, but all that very gracefully.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

She paints, and I like her painting: it is very simple and straightforward.”

“And Lieutenant Beix, what is his job in peace-time?”

“He is a banker—a big commercial bank. But his wife does not get on with him.”

“And you? You haven’t given me an answer. Do you love her?”

“What does it mean, to love? Do *you* know? My greatest pleasure is to be with her, but I cannot really love her enough, since I haven’t the courage to give up my life to her and live in Paris. And yet I realize well enough that I shall lose her, if I go on seeing so little of her.”

“But could you leave the mill?”

“Could I? . . . Obviously I could. I have merely to say: ‘I am going.’ No law on earth can compel me to live in Pont-de-l’Eure. I am young and active; I should get on anywhere . . . But sometimes it seems to me that I have become two persons. One Me says: ‘The essential thing is that your looms keep on working’; another Me replies: ‘Are you mad? You are making me waste the whole of my youth.’ I

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

know that the second personage expresses my thought more truly, and, in effect, I obey the first. It is queer, isn't it?"

"And down yonder, at Pont-de-l'Eure?" asked Delamain. "Nothing?"

"Nothing . . . I have a charming sister-in-law, but she is my sister-in-law . . . No, nothing."

"And marriage?"

"All young girls bore me. . . Can you tell me why?"

He stayed with Delamain until two o'clock in the morning and returned to his hotel on foot, through a lovely night. He had not been so happy for a long time.

CHAPTER TEN



THE inspection of the pieces after weaving was made at Quesnay and Lecourbe's by Daddy Leroy, a terror to negligent workmen. Monsieur Achille had trained him in his youth.

"Ah, Monsieur Bernard," he would say, "smears of lubrication-oil again! I've told the foreman a score of times, but the young folks of to-day, they don't care about nothing nor nobody; they just stick to their own little bit of a job, over and over again. What I says is, when you do a job you mun do it."

In incipient old age this Leroy committed the imprudence of marrying a pretty girl, who worked under him and coveted his savings. His wife wore silk stockings and was cynical in her unfaithfulness to him. Ill wed, ill fed, ill tended, the old man took to drink for consolation. He became dirty and wretched.

❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧

One morning, the two women who shared his duty with him saw this usually sober man come to work completely drunk. The night before, he had found his home empty, his wife gone off with a mason and the plate-glass wardrobe. He carefully donned his white coat, dusted his slippers, put them on and, quickly climbing to the top of a heap of pieces that were awaiting his inspection, pulled from his vest an old pistol bequeathed him by an uncle in the army and announced to the two women:

"I'm going to blow my brains out!"

"God A'mighty, God A'mighty!" they cried, their fingers in their ears. "Don't do that, Daddy, don't do that!"

"Aye, but I shall," he said. "My missus has left me, and I don't want her to have the last word. She'll read o' this in the paper, and it'll curdle the blood in her veins . . . I'm going to blow my brains out, I am!"

"'Tain't good sense, Daddy Leroy . . . We mun find M'sieur Bernard."

Pistol in hand, but faithful to discipline, he awaited the boss. But as Bernard could not be

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

found, the engineer Cazier, the veteran's oldest friend, came in his stead.

"Try and get hold of his revolver," the women called to him.

"You shut up . . . Kindness does it . . . A man the worse for liquor, if you cross him, he can do away with hisself . . . Now, just you wait and see . . . Women, why, there's plenty o' that sort o' thing! Myself, when I got back from the war, they told me mine had run away . . . To begin with, I was fair upset over it. But when I was in court and saw there was more nor a dozen there for the same game, we stared and then made a joke of it. Do like me—tha's still gotten thy mates."

"No, no," said the veteran. "My wife's a harlot. I'm going to blow my brains out!"

But as he was groping for the trigger with rather a trembling hand, Monsieur Cantaert and Langlois, the trade-union secretary, came up at the double. The secretary, in his fine pathetic voice, appealed to the old warrior not thus to desert his old comrades. The manager, a man from the north and very pious, spoke of suicide

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

with horror. The veteran gave them his ear. He shook his head and again raised his pistol. In vain big Cazier tried to take him in the flank. The drunkard saw him coming and threatened him with his weapon. At this moment Bernard arrived at last.

"What, Leroy," he said, "do you mean to kill yourself? And what will become of us without you? Who's going to inspect our pieces? And all this for a woman who isn't worthy to help you on with your coat . . ."

"M'sieur Bernard, I'm sorry to leave you like this . . . I'm sorry, specially as I know you can't find none to take my place. The young folks of to-day, they don't care about nothing nor nobody. But I've told that harlot I'm going to kill myself. I don't want her to have the last word. I'm going to blow my brains out!"

Monsieur Achille was just coming up on his rounds and received the tidings.

"What's all this?" he said severely. "I absolutely forbid you to blow your brains out here. You'll leave marks on my pieces."

❧❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧❧

Then Daddy Leroy came down from his perch and was disarmed without any trouble.

Bernard told this story to Delamain, who was immensely pleased with it.

"It's a surprisingly exact symbol of your own existence," said he.

"Not exact in every respect," said Bernard. But he remained a long time lost in thought.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*"Hélas! Donner tant à celui qui de
si peu se contenterait."*

MME. DE NOAILLES



IMONE BEIX had taken for three months, in the heart of the Basque country and in a still unspoiled village, an old house with carved wood balconies. Her husband, who had a liking for casinos and gaming-rooms, had soon tired of such solitude. At the beginning of September Bernard Quesnay installed himself for ten days at the inn.

Every morning at eleven o'clock he called for his mistress at her house. The sea was not far away. Simone, in a skimpy bathing-dress, baked her slender body in the sun, so that it was taking on the beautiful tones of Etruscan pottery.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Lying at her side in the sand, Bernard, half naked and burning on his own account, forgot everything except the sweetness of caresses under the Chinese umbrella. Towards noon they plunged into the water. Bernard was a good swimmer; Simone had more style. They lunched on the verge of red rocks, in a black and ochre inn with vast unsymmetrical roofs. Then Simone would seek out a corner to paint and Bernard watched her painting. As they made their way home, the ox-drawn carts were slowly returning to the farms; the lengthening shadows outlined more strongly the opulent curves of the hills.

For three days Bernard was happy. On the fourth morning, he rose early, with a feeling of impatience and anxiety.

At eight o'clock, the tam-o'-shantered postman delivered a letter to him from Antoine.

"We have no luck, my poor old chap; you only have to go for us to get into difficulties. It is everlastingly the rise in the cost of living. Several grades came yesterday to protest against the new wages. Going through the work-rooms,

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

I see nothing but discontented faces. Desmares tells me that good fellows like Heurtematte have complained loudly to him. The worst is that I had promised Françoise to go away with her for the week-end, and that cannot now be done. With a strike threatening on the horizon, grand-papa will not hear of it, and poor Françoise is bitterly disappointed. What a beastly business life is! On no account cut short your holidays, but we shall be glad to see you back.”

He put the letter into his pocket and strode up and down on the high road between the inn and beginning of the village. ‘I pace backwards and forwards like a wild beast in a cage,’ he said to himself. ‘But what a nuisance it is to be so far away!’ Perhaps by talking to Heurtematte or Ricard he might have been able . . . They listened more readily to him than to Antoine. There was no reason for it, but so it was . . . What could he do from a distance? Sit on the beach at a woman’s feet . . . The sight of the fair Basque landscape, all green hummocks, bored him. He felt as if inside him he had a kind of coiled spring vainly seeking to be re-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

leased. He stretched himself, yawned and looked at his watch; it was only ten o'clock.

When it was a proper hour for him to ring at Simone's and she came down, he felt less dissatisfied with himself. She wore a frock of pink organdie with a little white Quaker collar, white cuffs and a white leather belt: 'How pretty she is,' thought Bernard, overcome, 'with something so clear-cut and so strong . . .'

He went to take the little car out of the garage. He took a methodical and keen pleasure in silently manipulating the well-oiled gear-lever.

The moment he had stretched himself out on the sand his thoughts turned to the mill again: 'It is queer; I am experiencing again the sensations of war: you were on leave in Paris; you were coming away from a pleasant evening's entertainment, you bought a paper, read that things were going badly in the sector, and the evening was ruined . . . What's wanted is a talk with Langlois, their secretary. One could prove to him . . .'

"Yes . . ." he said out loud, absent-mindedly, in answer to a question of Simone's which he had not heard.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

She looked at him in surprise.

After lunch, while she was painting, Bernard, very silent, seemed for long plunged in thought, then got up, came to see what she was doing, walked a few paces away, came back.

"What is the matter with you?" she said.

"With me? Why, nothing."

"But there is. You are all on edge to-day. Have you had a letter from your brother? Is there something rotten in the state of Pont-de-l'Eure?"

"Yes, that's it. How well you know me!"

"You are so transparent, dear; of all the beings I know you are the one that least knows how to conceal his annoyance. It is an endearing trait, though. It is the 'child side' of you . . . Come now, what is it they want? Have they sent you marching-orders?"

"No, not at all; but they are in difficulties and I cannot help asking myself to what degree I am justified . . ."

"O, you are terrible!" she said with a spice of passion . . . "Yes, yes, terrible, I assure you. You are asking yourself whether you are justified

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

in spending ten days with your mistress. It is almost incredible, you know."

"Why, no," said Bernard. "It takes all men that way. Your husband is very busy too."

"I do not love my husband: that is all one to me. And moreover that is not the point. I will readily grant a man may be busy . . . In fact, I admire him for it. But I absolutely must feel that I too have a place in your mind. With you I know that the most insignificant occurrence in your mill takes precedence over the most important occurrence in our love. You must own that that is saddening and humiliating. Every now and then, you know, I have telephoned to you at Pont-de-l'Eure. O, if you could hear the exasperated tone of voice in which you speak back to me, because you are afraid of shocking your grandfather or the underling standing at your side . . . Your shame of being affectionate, that is what I reproach you with . . . do you understand?"

"I understand," he said, surprised, "but I think you are wrong. The portrait you draw of me is preposterous and inaccurate. What you

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

have just been saying, I tell myself too, and the mill is very often a vexation to me.”

“No, no, dear; you only think so . . . What you do is never a vexation, as long as you can act, give orders, in short think yourself of use. During the war, everybody in your regiment used to tell me that you were a model officer. Now you want to be a model employer. You have a ‘Simon le Pathétique’¹ side, a ‘virtuous apprentice’ side, you are ‘upright’—it is not a crime, only it’s boring. . . Or, alternatively, I should like you to be equally conscientious where our love is concerned.”

“But in love I have no need to be conscientious. I love you naturally, without effort.”

She put aside her paint-brushes, got up and seated herself at Bernard’s feet in the grass.

“You never succeed in anything without effort,” she said. “I myself, I try to make every moment of my life a little masterpiece. I want the morning-meeting to be beautiful, my dress to go with the weather and the time of day, the last words one says at night to make a good

¹ A character created by Jean Girandoux.

‘curtain.’ And I bear ill will towards a partner who spoils my effects . . . I have always been like that. . . I remember when I was fifteen years old (I was very pretty at fifteen), I had a young cousin who was in love with me. One evening—it was a divine night—on the balcony of my people’s house in the Boulevard Maillot, he told me that he loved me. The trees of the Bois were quivering in the moonlight. It was as it should be . . . Then I thought: ‘For everything to be quite perfect, he must send me some white roses in the morning.’ And as I knew he would not do it of his own accord, I told him to . . . When they came, they gave me as much pleasure as if I had not ordered them myself . . . With you, beloved, the roses never come.”

“Tell me what I’m to do.”

“Precisely, I am telling you. This holiday at Cambo . . . it is the first time that we are spending ten days together. I am very, very ambitious. I want them to be (in modern terms, of course) as beautiful as all the great romantic encounters . . . Yes, yes, it is possi-

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

ble. . . Only, you must help me. Forget your looms, your customers, your grandfather for ten days. . . You must tell me that it isn't nothing, ten days with a woman like me, who is doing all she can to give you pleasure . . . Come, say something!”

She looked at him for a moment in a melancholy way. On their left there was a kind of heath, covered with bracken and heather, on their right a little wood of stunted, riven oaks.

CHAPTER TWELVE



BERNARD did not cut short his holidays. Monsieur Achille received him coldly. Wages were raised and peace reigned in the Valley again. The truce lasted for two months; then at Pont-de-l'Eure market Madame Petitseigneur and Madame Quimouche, better paid, saw eggs and butter rise, as if mysterious tubes, to keep them at a uniform level, had been laid in connexion between these ladies' purses and their saucepans.

In his office Bernard beheld again the broken-hearted Chorus of Suppliant Women.

"We can't go on, Monsieur Bernard, we can't go on . . . You must raise us again, just the least little bit."

"It is lunacy," said Monsieur Achille.

"Law of supply and demand," said Monsieur Lecourbe.

But the employers' federation granted once

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

more what was demanded of them. They and their kind were living blissful in a fool's paradise of insane prosperity. The more furiously commodities rose, the more the sheep-like herd ran after them.

“In my days . . .” growled Monsieur Achille.

He was dissatisfied with his grandsons. Françoise had so earnestly besought her husband to get her away from Pont-de-l'Eure, that, eventually and much in his own despite, he had taken her to Morocco. As a pretext he had alleged a voyage of investigation into wool. He had spent three weeks at Rabat, at Fez and at Marakesh, and brought home badly woven cloths which his wife extolled for their coarseness. Bernard often went to Paris, but seemed to be wasting his time there, since his customers complained that they never set eyes on him.

“Your heart is not in your job,” Monsieur Achille would say to the two young men.

“Our job goes of its own accord,” they answered.

“Your cloth is badly turned out.”

“Everyone finds it all right.”

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"You over-pay your hands."

"That is not their view."

For the workpeople, malcontent denizens of the fools' paradise, hoped to see (by means of a miracle, no doubt, and divine intervention) wages rise without end and the price of manufactured articles fall. They reached the point—quite unknown in that sensible Normandy of theirs—of violently hating their too steadily thriving employers. Their long prosperity, which by the novelty of its benefits had brought them together at first, had ended by sundering the two classes. As in certain too happy homes, a wife, unnerved by tranquillity, comes to wishing for the death of a husband who is over-considerate to her whimsies, these fellows, whose every demand was fulfilled, would turn into a grievance against their unduly wealthy masters a munificence which they felt to proceed from indifference more than from generosity.

In the trade-union, Langlois, a supporter of the principles of Proud'hon and '48,¹ had been

¹ *I.e.*, an old-fashioned labour leader, who believed that Proud'hon, who died in 1865, and the proletarian protagonists in the revolution of 1848 had said the last word on socialism.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

succeeded by Renaudin, a little, hard-faced man who talked severely to the middle-classes, announcing their speedy end. The coming into force of the new Eight Hours Law provided him with a pretext for the fight he had longed for.

Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, on behalf of the employers, offered to maintain the ten-hours-day wages for a working day shortened by one-fifth. Renaudin declared that that was not enough.

“But I say it is enough,” Monsieur Pascal Bouchet told him. “You want to work less and earn more? . . . You are crazy! If you are looking for a *casus belli* . . . you shall have one.”

“Monsieur Pascal,” said Renaudin, “pay good heed to what I say . . . You have just used a word I do not like at all . . . Tempers are up.”

“I can’t help that,” said Monsieur Bouchet. “*Quod dixi . . . dixi . . .* At most I might be able to grant you some slight concessions, if, by way of off-set, overtime on holidays were paid at the usual rates.”

“What do you mean by holidays?” asked Renaudin.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Why," said Monsieur Bouchet, taken aback, "Christmas, Easter . . ."

"Christmas was all very well in the days of Jesus Christ. Myself, I only know of one holiday: May Day."

A long snarl of indignation ran round the employers' table.

"*Quousque tandem, Catilina,*" murmured Monsieur Pascal.

All the same, he gave way again over the question of holidays. But there was this peculiarity about the negotiations: the successive concessions brought no state of peace. All the time that they dreaded it, both parties wanted war. Like the peoples of Europe in August, 1914, they were tired of their own moderation. Just as occupants of a motor-car, seeing themselves driven to certain disaster by a drunken driver, from a sentiment of honour do not intervene to mitigate his speed, so Renaudin's inveterate determination and Monsieur Pascal's grandiloquence led two resigned flocks to a collision which both feared.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

At the moment when everything seemed settled:

"And the stokers in the boiler-room?" said Renaudin. "They demand . . ."

"Look here!" exclaimed Bernard Quesnay with a vehemence that astonished himself . . .

"Look here, don't you see that . . ."

"You must not argue, Bernard," said Monsieur Lecourbe.

When a long period of drought and heat has accumulated in the stagnant air too great a reserve of energy, a storm must break. None of these mill-owners could have said precisely why in the end they denied the stokers what they had so readily granted to the other classes of labour. There was really no reason, but these successive onslaughts against the employers' patience had finally worn down their nerves. The storm burst.

"Very well," said Renaudin, with his biting voice . . . "Your stokers will not be at the mill to-morrow morning."

"They can stay at home."

“ Bernard Quesnay “

“Good-bye for the present, gentlemen. You will have to give in.”

Then, when the workmen had left the room:

“Well,” said Monsieur Pascal, “we shall close down to-morrow, that is all . . .”

Bernard interrupted him, vibrant and acrid:

“Close down a mill with a thousand hands on account of four stokers! What an idea, Monsieur Pascal . . . If necessary, I had rather stoke myself.”

“I should like to see you,” said Monsieur Le-courbe.

“You will see me.”

There was thunder everywhere.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Vous avez donné pleinement dans cette folie de la première jeunesse qu'on appelle le zèle."

STENDHAL



HE stars were shining in a sky of black velvet when Bernard Quesnay, exhilarated by a pleasant enough sensation, passed through the sleeping town. The air was chilly. Sometimes, far away, a step echoed on the cobbles. When he arrived before the mill, he had difficulty in divining the black mass in the solid darkness.

As he was walking up the long yard, a voice issued from the night:

"Good morning, Monsieur Bernard."

He recognized the hearty tones of the chief engineer.

"Good morning, Cazier . . . Well, are they going to leave us in the lurch?"

"Upon my soul, Monsieur Bernard, since they're not here, I am afraid they mean to, right enough . . . They voted for striking by forty votes to thirty. Our chaps were against; but they daren't come. Though I don't belong to the union, I have a word with more than one that does. They're frightened of a boot in the backside. Shall I turn on the light? When there's a row on, it's a good thing."

He threw in a main switch. Immediately the works stood in a blaze of light. Although the machines were not working, the mill seemed alive at once, like a sick man whose eyes still preserve the lustre of life. It struck five.

"They won't come," said the big engineer. "Crew of wasters! What shall we do?"

"Find casual stokers and carry on."

"I shall be surprised if you find any . . . They're not a very bold lot, hereabouts. When they go for you, it's better hereabouts to shout 'Fire' than 'Help,' if you want to see heads at the windows."

"My brother and I will do the stoking, with some clerks."

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

“You won’t do it for long.”

Towards six o’clock, undecided groups began to form at the gate. Bernard went up to them. They bade him a subdued Good morning. Women nudged one another with their elbows and laughed.

“Is the mill working, Monsieur Bernard?”

“Why, of course it’s working . . . All we need is some willing men, to stoke. The engineers are at their posts. . . You are not going to play, a thousand of you, for want of four volunteers? You, Ricard, you’re not afraid?”

Ricard, a colossus who had won the Military Medal, turned very red.

“I am not afraid, but I can’t take these men’s jobs.”

“Who’s talking of taking their jobs? They’ll get them again when they come back.”

“It’s not so much that, as I don’t want to have words with nobody.”

“And if some one should say something! You’re as strong as a lion.”

“That’s it, Monsieur Bernard, that’s just it; I know what I’m made on, I’d be laying two or

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

three on 'em out . . . that'd be a bad look-out."

By dint of rhetoric he enlisted some men, who made their way down into the boiler-room. But he saw clearly that their mates looked upon them, not as heroes, but as traitors. It made him uneasy, on their account as well as his own.

In the boiler-room he watched the pressure rise.

"Will it take long?"

"No, sir, it's still warm; a few bundles of heather and the fire'll catch."

With the improvised stokers he learned the job. An hour later, the triumphant siren proclaimed the resurrection of the mill. Bernard hurried through the weaving-room: it was all but empty. In a room of forty looms, three wavering women were in colloquy.

"O, lawk-a-mussy, it gives you the creeps to be so alone! If only everybody was come, we might have the heart . . ."

"The heart, you say? But what are you afraid of?"

"What we be afraid of? Why, it ain't them

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

as is used to the job that's on the machines . . .
If everything blew up . . .”

Like the engineer Cazier they too feared and desired disasters at one and the same time, as, no doubt, the inhabitants of a town in an invaded district both fear and desire a bombardment.

“What an idea! The engineers are there; I give you my word they know all about the boilers.”

“That makes no matter . . . It'd be better if they didn't work at all than work like this.”

An obscure but powerful class-feeling rendered odious to them the wages they were about to earn. When Bernard went down into the middle yard again, Monsieur Cantaert informed him that one of the crews had disbanded, overcome by remorse. At that moment Antoine came up.

“Antoine, shall we take on a boiler, the two of us?”

“Right you are.”

Naked to the waist, in blue dungaree trousers, the two brothers betook themselves to stoking.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



WHEN, at dinner-time that evening, they came to table with soft shirts, well brushed hair and ruddy faces, they were extremely pleased with themselves. As a good soldier, who has fought as best he can in his corner, fancies that the battle is won, regardless of the insignificance of his part and of the general catastrophe, they showed little interest in the strike and, overcome by a wholesome fatigue, thought only of exchanging their impressions, going to bed and sleeping. Françoise played her part of Woman in Wartime, admired the warriors and rewarded them with her praises.

“How tired you must be!”

“Not as bad as all that: if you are in training for games, you are equal to anything. The only bad time is when you clean up . . .”

“And the hands? What do they say?”

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

“We don’t know; we haven’t seen a creature in our hole.”

After dinner, when Françoise, at her brother-in-law’s request, had just begun the *andante* of the Fifth Symphony (“Don’t call it ‘The Fifth,’ Françoise—you make me think of Madame Verdurin.”) and was sending forth those notes which gently, gently sink like soft caresses on to a weary brow, they heard in the grounds the little iron gate clang noisily and then steps hurrying over the gravel. Françoise recognized the signs of Monsieur Achille’s approach. The two young men got up.

“The old man? At this hour? What can the trouble be?”

His hat on his head and his stick in his hand, he walked into the drawing-room, followed by Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, calm and smiling as usual.

“So there you are, the two of you! At last! And what the devil have you been up to all day?”

“Don’t you know? We have been stoking boiler No. 2.”

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"Ah, to be sure!" said Monsieur Achille ironically, flourishing his stick. "In your craft the captain's place is in the pantry, is it?"

"If there are no stewards, certainly," Bernard answered, furious.

Going softly up to Monsieur Achille, Françoise with an adroit gesture took the old man's hat from his head, his stick from his hands and pushed an arm-chair up to him. The only woman in this family, she played with the old chief the part of the Duchesse de Bourgogne at the court of Louis XIV. To entertain him, she would perform countless pretty little tricks, sometimes with success. At other times she hated him. Monsieur Pascal Bouchet lit a cigar and began a discourse:

"To be sure, you have given proof of great energy, my young friends . . . In principle, however, Monsieur Achille is right: *de minimis non curat prætor* . . . And, in effect, your enterprise has led to mischievous results . . . We have just had a visit from one of my old workmen, one of the faithful, who was present at a meeting of the Trade Council at six o'clock this

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

evening. Now, feeling has risen very high against you, against the firm of Quesnay and Lecourbe. . . The stokers are furious that you have been able to carry on . . . People are saying that you have compelled children of thirteen to work in the boiler-room, that one of them has been badly burnt, that a steam-pipe has burst and Heaven knows what besides!”

“But that’s tommy-rot, sir. We don’t employ children; no one has been burnt and if you will come with me you can see for yourself that the boilers are in perfect order.”

“I don’t doubt it, you may be sure, but the mischief is done.”

“The absurdity of all this twaddle is easily proved.”

“No, my dear Bernard, no: nothing is more difficult to refute than what is utterly untrue . . . Don’t you know the affair of the soldier Vibulenus? No? Ah, these young men have got their ‘indigo base.’ Well, my boy, read it in Tacitus before going to sleep to-night . . . And you will see how a Roman general got into

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

the greatest trouble for putting to death a legionary who never existed!”

“Meanwhile,” said Monsieur Achille, “they have decided to prevent our working to-morrow by every means, ‘violence included’ . . . A word that has never been heard in Pont-de-l’Eure. Ah, you have done a fine day’s work, the two of you. Why couldn’t you let them have their strike, if they thought it a lark?”

“I regret nothing in what I have done,” said Bernard, standing with folded arms confronting his grandfather, “and I shall do it again to-morrow . . . In the last analysis, it is physical force which wins battles, and that is as it should be. If the middle-class wishes to keep command, it must know . . .”

Shrugging his shoulders and muttering, Monsieur Achille asked for his hat and stick. At the door he called out again to Bernard:

“And what’s all this story too about your having stuck up a notice at the factory-gates, bragging that you’ll break the strike, if it costs you millions?”

“What’s that?” said Bernard, flabbergasted.

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

“I’ve simply had a notice put up to announce that we shall be working to-morrow.”

“How was it framed, that notice of yours?”

“I can’t remember now . . . ‘Messrs. Quesnay and Lecourbe hereby give their employees notice that, in spite of the stokers’ strike, they have used all the means at their disposal to ensure the continued . . .’”

Monsieur Achille lifted his arms to heaven.

“All the means at their disposal! All the means at their disposal! Ah, you’ve a rare gift of expression!”

And brandishing his walking-stick, he departed, furious.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



AT the gate of Quesnays' a great arc-lamp lit up with fantastic illumination a number of exasperated faces which stood out with strange brilliance against a background of seething mob in heavy shadow. Several hundred strikers, massed before the gate, were reviling the infrequent hands who obstinately desired to go on working. As they came up, the Quesnay brothers saw from afar in the sector of light a woman forcing a passage for herself and finally managing to get through, her shawl pulled off her shoulders, her skirt torn.

Pale and resolute, ready for the fray, they came upon these demonstrators. To their great surprise, however, as soon as they were recognized, the ranks opened out, the shouts died down: such were the laws of that warfare, the rules of the game. The boss was fighting his battle: it was his right. He was even honoured

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

for it. But the traitors to the labouring class had to run the gauntlet.

Bernard hurried through the almost deserted work-rooms. The only arrivals were those workpeople who had so pressing a need for their wages that they had become indifferent to any humiliation: some unmarried mothers who had to rear their brat, some widows without savings, no more than three or four men, those eternally "agin the government."

"No use holding out," said Monsieur Achille, when he arrived at eight o'clock. . . "Close down everything."

With his grandsons he set out on a tour of the expiring mill. The driving-belts were gently ceasing to revolve; outside one heard the scalding snort of boilers blowing off. Then a great silence set in.

Alone, in an immense room where the machines gleamed useless and the belting hung disregarded, the old mill-owner looked like a great spirit which, stricken by paralysis, gazes stupefied at its motionless limbs. Without a word the three men made their way back to the office,

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

bowed down by a feeling of sadness and solitude.

‘But why?’ thought Bernard, walking along with bent head . . . ‘We have all this crowd against us. . . How unjust! One day it too will find itself standing before motionless machines. Its strength will be ready to make them go, but the coal will not have come from England, the wool will not have come from Australia, because some delicate organism will have been destroyed, some old man’s crown knocked off . . .’

At that moment he heard his grandfather’s voice behind him:

“Bernard, put this drum back straight.”

Monsieur Achille was putting a row of them in order.

In the office they found Monsieur Lecourbe, excited and caressing his President Carnot beard with feverish strokes.

“The excesses to which these ringleaders go beggar description. Through the window I saw them seize hold of Ricard when he went out. They beat him and fastened a placard labelled

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

'traitor' on his back, and Renaudin invited the women to take him home, spitting on him all the way! Up to a certain point and in a certain degree, these brawls among the workpeople are no concern of ours; all the same . . ."

Bernard, clenching his fists, burst out with a cry:

"No concern of ours, you say . . . A brave fellow who, alone, put himself on our side? It is infamous! Let us close down for a month! Let us clear out! Let us leave Pont-de-l'Eure!"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Monsieur Achille harshly. "We're not at the play. . . This whole affair has been badly handled. We must look out now."

Monsieur Cantaert came, bringing news: Renaudin had left in a motor-car for Louviers, where he intended to bring about a stoppage of the Bouchet mill.

"We must telephone to the prefecture," said Monsieur Lecourbe, "and have him arrested."

"You would do him a great service," said Monsieur Achille.

❧❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧❧

Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, another master-magician, who arrived towards the end of the afternoon, was of the same opinion.

“Renaudin,” said he, “has set a thing in motion that will greatly embarrass him before two days are out. Enthusiasm does not last. Next week, his henchmen will start calling him to account. If you make a martyr of him, you set him free of all responsibility . . . And martyrs act as stimulants . . . We must wait.”

Then he began an interminable conversation with Monsieur Achille about the precautions required to prevent the abandoned cloth from rotting in the damp milling-rooms.

“Beware of sun especially,” said Monsieur Achille to him. “If the pieces are not shifted from time to time, the part exposed to the light bleaches. In the dyeing afterwards, it comes out in bright streaks.”

“To be sure it will,” said Monsieur Pascal. “I had an old foreman-finisher, who always used to tell of the terrible trouble he had with stains, when they were left overnight in the river. ‘And ye may believe me or not, M’sieu’ Pascal,’ he

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

would say, ‘but it was a devil of a moon that streaked our bolts in t’ watter.’ ”

With a movement of his wrist Monsieur Achille dispatched the young men to do combat against the hostile stars. The two old men remained alone: Monsieur Achille, as dry as a stick, a trifle yellow, Monsieur Pascal filling out his fresh-coloured skin, his eternal rose in his buttonhole. Since the jerking of the looms had stopped shaking his office, Monsieur Achille seemed sick and sad. To divert him, Monsieur Pascal offered to take him along to Louviers and show him over his idle mill.

It was the first time that old Quesnay had penetrated into that mysterious retreat, which for so long had been to him the cave of the Spirit of Evil. He was astonished to find there old buildings like his own, the same smell of wool-fat and hot oil. But the factory was more up-to-date, the walls seemed freshly repainted, one caught glimpses of lavatories distempered with Ripolin and of cloak-rooms with nickel-plated hat-pegs.

Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, a worthy man and

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

proud, moreover, of his kingdom, conducted the great enemy chieftain through it with affectionate complacency. Monsieur Achille, troubled by painful memories and vague fears, only stayed a short while.

Returned to the soil of his own tribe, he stalked the silent yard for a long time, voluptuously snuffing up the smell of *his* wool and *his* oil.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE five days which the young Quesnays spent in lethargy at their mill seemed interminable. No peace in sight. Each side had pronounced so many vows that the word "conciliation" was considered infamous in both camps. Tumultuous processions marched through the astonished streets of Pont-de-l'Eure. Bernard, who watched them passing from the factory-windows, admired the enthusiasm they evinced and regretted that he could not join in them.

In the front rank there marched Renaudin, arm-in-arm with two comrades, his face rapt in a kind of ecstasy. 'At bottom,' thought Bernard, 'he is perhaps not such a bad fellow, and this popularity must be intoxicating.' Behind him came a large bevy of pretty young girls, then, carrying a red flag, the big stoker Ricard.

"What's this, Antoine? Has that chap turned

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

revolutionary now? I thought he was beadle at St. Louis's and bugler to the fire-brigade."

"That's right enough," said Antoine. "But he can't see a parade without marching at the head of it."

"It would be a pity if he didn't," said Bernard. "He is the drum-major type."

The crowd tailed off in order of decreasing enthusiasm, so that, towards the end of the procession, where the veterans and carts full of children trundled along, you did not quite know whether you were looking at demonstrators, passers-by, or objectors.

A group of militants which brought up the rear of the *cortège* struck Bernard because of the hardness of their faces: 'What Septembrist¹ heads;' he thought. At that moment, one of these men noticed the two Quesnay brothers at their window, and said aloud with naïve sincerity: "What slave-drivers' mugs!" That threw Bernard into endless reflexions.

Returning home, he met Heurtematte and bade him Good evening.

¹ The "Septembrists" were the active agents in the first Reign of Terror, September, 1792.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Beg pardon, Monsieur Bernard," said the man, "but I can't walk along with you. They'd say I'd been bought over. It's awful the bad blood there is."

Sunday came. After mass Bernard accompanied Françoise home. In the garden, the first roses stood chiselled out in their full, perfect forms. A vague musical murmur rose up from the little town that lay stifling in the blazing heat.

"How quiet it is!" said Bernard. "Who would think that this peaceful little hole could poison our life in this way! How fitting it is what you were singing yesterday: 'Ah God, ah God, simple and quiet is life over yonder. . . That peaceable humming. . .'² Would you believe it, Françoise—at times I pine for the war! It is awful, if you like. You had a bad time of it; but, all the same, there was great happiness in feeling oneself 'at one.' I knew that my men respected me; I ran the same dangers as they, I was satisfied with myself. Here, I feel myself suspect, envied. And it is unjust . . . A man

² *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là simple et tranquille . . . Cette paisible rumeur-là . . .* Verlaine.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

like my friend Delamain, who only works for his own amusement, who has any amount of leisure, has the right to be a socialist, a friend of the people, and to have himself cheered if he wants to. And I, who really only take on this beastly job to allow the workpeople to go on working (you know how little I care about money), I am detested . . . No, no. I abominate all that, I have had enough of it. I am not joking, you know . . . I want to throw up everything, shake off my shoulders the burden of this mill, its bricks and its machines.”

“And I?” said she. “Don’t you think that I have had enough of it? I don’t know, Bernard, but sometimes I get the impression that all this is one gigantic lunacy. Why do you all live as you do? Look at your grandfather: he will be dead in four years, or five, but what has he experienced, what has he made of his life? He is an unhappy maniac, a lunatic, I tell you, and Antoine is mad, and you, you will go mad too. My little Bacot is already sacrificed, I know for a certainty. And I, I am wretched.”

“You?” said Bernard, crossing his arms and

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

looking his sister-in-law in the face. “But why? *You* have got no idle mill and hands on strike. You have everything to make you happy; you have your pretty children, a nice house, an easy life.”

“You are extraordinary people,” said she (and, doubtless, that “you” designated the whole tribe of Quesnays). “You believe that if you give a woman as much money as she wants and, every now and then, a kiss on the forehead, she must be happy. It isn’t so. Your grandmother and your mother . . .”

“I don’t believe, Françoise, that our grandmother was very unhappy. Mother—that was another matter, because she came from Paris. She never got accustomed to Pont-de-l’Eure.”

“Your grandmother? She was buried alive. Your grandfather forgot she was there for whole evenings on end. The first year of my marriage, her existence terrified me. When I became bored, she was astounded: ‘Why don’t you do some work?’ she used to ask me. ‘In my day a young woman always had some needlework.’ And really she made all those awful net sun-

blinds over at your place. She had a drawing-room which she never opened, because sun fades the curtains. She never went out. She had never seen Chartres or Dreux, which are within a stone's throw. When I said to her: 'Don't you long for anything? Have you no wish to see Italy or Egypt, in short, to enjoy yourself?' she would reply: 'Life is not made for enjoyment. I have helped my husband; I have brought up my children well; I shall not hold out empty hands in the Presence.' ”

“And don't you think that very fine?” said Bernard, not without a touch of pride.

“Very fine? Perhaps. Only, I don't understand it. I want to be happy.”

‘(They are all the same),’ thought Bernard, ‘(Simone would have used the same phrases).’ “But don't you think this appetite for happiness in young women of your generation is rather a weakness, a sign of inner poverty?”

“You are like Antoine,” she said, a trifle annoyed. “You allow yourself the right to be dissatisfied, and you decree that for women all is well.”

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Behind them the gravel crunched. They turned about.

"Ah!" said Françoise, happy, "here's the Pasha."

That was the name which the Pascal-Bouchet children gave their father, whom they greatly loved. He came up to them, smiling, with an enormous rose in his buttonhole.

"What faces on the two of you! What's wrong, young Bernard?"

"Do you want anything more, sir?" said Bernard.

"What's that? O, this strike! In a week's time we shan't remember anything about it . . ."

"How can it be settled? Each side has sworn . . ."

"Sworn? Where should we be landed, my dear boy, if we had to perform all we swore to? . . . 'We shall never compromise!'—that means: not in the next five minutes, not to-day . . . But to-morrow! . . . Everything comes out all right."

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"How, sir? . . . If it does, so that we go on waging a sort of subterranean feud with our workpeople, I had rather become a taxi-driver . . . I want to be loved."

"A master," said Monsieur Pascal, "is neither loved nor hated . . . He is a master, that is to say responsible. . ."

"Well then, let us say, if you prefer, that I no longer wish to be a master."

"Most happily, your wishes are not consulted," said Monsieur Pascal, patting him on the shoulder. "Françoise, my dear, where are Bacot and Micheline? You see, Bernard, I turn the strike to account by seeing more of my grandchildren. *Renaudin nobis haec otia fecit.*"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



AT the beginning of the strike Simone Beix had deeply sympathized with Bernard. She had written to him that she could imagine his cares, that she loved him very much, that she was thinking of him. Bernard had replied with a little note of two lines in the tone of a general tossing off a bulletin in the heat of battle. Then he had completely forgotten his mistress's existence. The emotions of this struggle rendered him incapable of experiencing any others. Entirely given up to seeking out means for the overthrow of Renaudin, he neglected those for keeping Simone. She was confident that he would come to Paris to see her, if only "between trains." As a matter of fact, the idea never even occurred to him.

At the end of ten days, such indifference had stung her, and Bernard received a somewhat

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

ironical letter: "I am not very clear now, beloved. In the days when your mill was working, you could not get away, because it was working; nor now, because it is not working. Why are you not on strike yourself? I picture you sitting on a heap of wrecked machinery. . . . Bernard Quesnay on the ruins of Pont-de-l'Eure . . . or perhaps planted on a stump at the street-corner, rallying to their work a crowd vanquished by your eloquence. But no—you would not be successful as a public orator. You would rather lack the mellowness and nonchalance . . . Seriously, dear, what are you doing? You must come to Paris on Tuesday. I shall be free, absolutely free; I can meet you at the station, if you come by the noon train, and spend the whole day with you. Wire to me at the studio what time you arrive."

As he read it, Bernard had said to himself: 'Why not?' It was perfectly true that he was not doing anything. For the first few days he had spent some hours in taking precautions for the preservation of the cloth and in stopping certain consignments. Customers, in ignorance of

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

the strike, had continued to write. They had to be answered. At the end of a week the correspondence had become thin, then nonexistent; but the habits of the Quesnays had so strong a dominion over them that they still arrived at the office by eight o'clock. There they stayed till lunch, returning punctually at two o'clock and not leaving again until the evening. These long days passed in vain and interminable conversations. Monsieur Lecourbe elaborated theories about wages; Bernard betrayed violent sentiments, which Monsieur Achille ridiculed with a growl. They discovered a charm in this anxious indolence. Like a soldier placed as sentinel at a post of no great danger, but yet an honourable one, the Quesnays did not feel themselves on the square with their consciences but by denying themselves the right to go away. They sat at the bedside of this moribund mill as at that of a sick man, who can no longer speak, whose last breath is awaited by the family with a mixture of impatience, sadness and pity, and whose more distant relations, talking, bored and subdued, in the next room, realize perfectly well the use-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

lessness of their presence, but would think it disgraceful to desert.

Sometimes a visit from Monsieur Pascal, or the mayor, or the police-superintendent would for a moment embellish the monotony of the days. At the beginning, Bernard and Antoine had attempted to read, but Monsieur Achille had said “Books at the office!” in such a way that they had given it up. The sacred character of these high places appeared to them more clearly in days of trial.

Bernard put Simone’s letter in his pocket without disclosing any emotion. A little later he murmured with a feigned negligence: “I shall perhaps go to Paris on Tuesday . . .” Neither Monsieur Achille nor Monsieur Lecourbe nor Antoine gave any reply; all three were contemplating with gloomy attentiveness the blue tapestry which covered the walls. Bernard should have stopped there, but an obscure feeling of guilt made him continue: “After all,” he said, “there is nothing to do here.” To this Monsieur Achille retorted, raising his thick,

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

shaggy eyebrows: “There is always something to do”; and Bernard comprehended forthwith the infamy of his project. The really shameful thing was to think of his pleasures in the midst of his country’s misfortunes. He was extremely cross with Simone for occasioning this lack of tact. At noon he sent her a wire: “Regret impossible leave mill. Love. Bernard.”

Towards five a small telegraph-boy came into the Quesnays’ office and asked: “Monsieur Bernard?” Bernard read:

“You, sir, are king; I weep, but you remain. Bérénice.”¹

He made a movement of impatience, crumpled up the telegram and put it in his pocket. The others looked at him inquiringly and reproachfully. To receive telegrams at the office without saying something about them was not countenanced by the Quesnays. He thought: ‘I certainly won’t go.’

When he took his refusal to the post-office the telegraphist of Pont-de-l’Eure smiled; she fol-

¹ Simone Beix imagines that she is quoting from Racine’s tragedy *Bérénice*.—TRANS.

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

lowed the amours of Monsieur Quesnay with interest and had wondered several times since morning whether he would give way, but was quite baffled when Bérénice, a new female, became mixed up in the intrigue.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



BERNARD was not sorry that he had stayed: for the Tuesday was marked by a little drama. About ten in the morning Monsieur Cantaert entered the office, very much agitated and puffing, since he was stout and had been running.

"There's a man dead, Monsieur Achille."

Everybody stood up.

"What? Dead?" said Bernard.

"In the weaving-shed down by the water-side, Monsieur Bernard. It's Leroy; they've killed him."

"Who did? The strikers?"

"Yes, Monsieur Bernard . . . That Renaudin . . ."

He explained. In this weaving-shed, an old building in the Louis XV style, overgrown with roses, there remained a few hand-looms, of which Monsieur Cantaert had wished to make

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

use for weaving samples against next season. He had found some old weavers retired into the country and had engaged them. They belonged to an age where unions and strikes hardly existed; they had come with enthusiasm. Daddy Leroy, the old inspector whom Monsieur Achille had saved from suicide, supervised them. For the first fortnight Renaudin had not known of their presence. The steam-engine was stopped; no one gave a thought to the hand-loom; the smoke-stack, shorn of its crown of smoke, was a guarantee. Then, without doubt, the noise of the looms or a spy had given them away. Suddenly, that Tuesday morning, a crowd of fifteen hundred strikers had surrounded the shed, jeering at the “black-legs” and throwing stones through the windows. The veterans, surprised, had stopped their looms and endeavoured to get out. Their appearance had been greeted with catcalls and a volley of abuse. At that moment old Leroy had collapsed. The shouting did not cease straightway, because the old man’s fall had passed unobserved. Then, seeing him motionless and the others bending over him, the

•• Bernard Quesnay ••

demonstrators had become alarmed and held their noise. The gatekeeper had ventured to come up and had said, stupefied: "Eh! Eh! But he's dead!" The front ranks heard and, like a flock of scared crows, the rowdies fled away from the corpse.

"You have seen him for yourself? You are certain he is dead?" asked Monsieur Achille, distrustful of all second-hand reports.

"Absolutely certain, Monsieur Achille. Besides, I've sent for the doctor."

"A death," said Bernard. "The business is getting serious. This time, that Renaudin . . ."

"Renaudin?" said Monsieur Achille. "Renaudin has perhaps got nothing whatever to do with it. Besides, I cannot make head or tail of this affair. What did he, what did Leroy die of? Did anyone touch him?"

"O no, Monsieur Achille. He was ten or twelve yards away from the demonstrators."

"Someone must have fired on him then?" queried Bernard.

"Fired!" said Monsieur Achille. "Did anyone fire, Cantaert?"

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"O no, Monsieur Achille. He must have died of a stroke."

"That does not alter the fact," said Bernard, "that it was the excitement which proved the immediate cause of his death. . . It is Renaudin who killed him. . . It must be shouted from all the housetops and placarded on all the walls of Pont-de-l'Eure."

"You had much better go and look," said Monsieur Achille.

Bernard went. Through the door of the shed he saw Dr. Guérin buttoning up a shirt. He went up and gazed at the dead man's face. He was a fine old man, with white moustache and imperial. In a tree, a bird sang. Bernard uncovered.

"What did he die of, doctor?"

"I don't know, my friend. He was a stranger to me . . . I can find no trace of a wound or a bruise. Cardiac casualty, I suppose."

The police-superintendent came on the scene and asked if he should telephone to Evreux and have a magistrate sent down.

"What for?" said the doctor. "It isn't a mur-

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

der . . . Have him taken to the hospital, and I'll make the *post mortem*."

In the evening Bernard went to enquire the result of his investigation; he nourished a vague hope that he might be able to prove Renaudin's guilt.

"Well, doctor? What about our man?"

Dr. Guérin rubbed his hands with the air of a collector who had just come across a good specimen.

"A superb coronary angina," was his satisfied reply.

As he walked away, Bernard saw that the walls of the infirmary were covered with big red posters. He went up and read the head-line in enormous letters:

EMPLOYERS' VICTIM

"Capitalist greed has at last claimed a victim. An unhappy octogenarian. . ."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ON the following morning Monsieur Pascal received a telephone message that the prefect desired to see him.

Monsieur le préfet Caumont, a great artist in administration, a great expert in men, had been ready for some days past to proffer his mediation; but, as English bishops keep a look-out for a falling barometer before ordering Prayers for Rain, he had waited before intervening until the storm had produced its beneficent results.

Enthusiasm is only maintained by change—which makes the agitator's task a hard one. In war-time, the heads of the ministry command a thousand ephemeral attractions for rekindling the nations' zeal: entry of new allies into the arena, minor attacks, diplomatic notes. Renaudin, for his part too, did all he could to keep his

❧ ❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧ ❧

troops at a high pitch. At the start, processions and singing had sufficed. The *International* had caught on; then people had got sick of it. For want of something better, they had come to singing "Ho, for a student's life, Mother" and, as a last resort, *La Madelon*.¹ A few days of bodily rest and oral violence had thoroughly calmed the nerves. The vehement eloquence of orators sent down from Paris had displeased the peaceful masses of Pont-de-l'Eure. The work-people wanted to get back to their jobs and the masters to their office. It was now only a matter of saving their face.

For this purpose the Prefect of the Department of the Eure was truly admirable. Long experience had taught him the salutary effects of solemn eloquence. Two parties at issue and believing that they hated one another, made aware by this inimitable orator of their common ground of humanity, had to recognize that they were men and that their sensibilities were susceptible to the same accents.

Having assembled, at a table shaped like a

¹ The equivalent of *Tipperary*.

horseshoe, the employers on his right, the workmen on his left, he delivered a short speech from the throne. A mere administrator, lacking technical knowledge, he would take good care not to grapple with the fundamental question. If he had thought it his duty to intervene, it was in the interest of the innocent victims of a conflict between interests of equal consideration; women and children ("hear, hear" from the labour side) would shortly be exposed to the horrors of starvation . . . At a time when the country, already sorely tried by cruel losses ("hear, hear" on the capitalist side), required all the active strength of the nation . . . he was assured that devotion to these sacred duties would prevail over the impulses of violence ("hear, hear" on all sides).

Nevertheless, the real question—that of the stokers—still awaited solution. Renaudin, having said "15 per cent or nothing," wished to beat a retreat, but couldn't. Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, having declared "*Quod dixi, dixi*," wished to concede 7 or 8 per cent, but did not know how

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

to do it without appearing ridiculous. For the prefect it was child's play. These wages, which the one wished to get and to which the others could not agree—he awarded them without awarding them, he withheld them without withholding them. He withheld them under the name of wages, but he awarded them under the name of bonuses. He withheld them without hurting the pride of Labour; he awarded them without undermining the masters' authority. He withheld them while lauding proletarian moderation; he awarded them while exalting the good will of the *bourgeoisie*.

His proposal travelled many times backwards and forwards from masters to men and from the men to the masters, but it was as the budget travels from the Lower to the Upper House; everyone knows from the beginning of the ceremony that, after some bridling of an affronted old prude, the high assembly will accept some "working formula."

In a short closing discourse the prefect congratulated the captains of industry on their fecund and large-minded enterprise, the working

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

classes on the intelligent comprehension of their corporate interests.

All round the table there were embracings and shakings by the hand. Renaudin, all smiles, shook Monsieur Pascal's hand, saying:

"No ill feeling."

"'Let us be friends, Cinna,'" replied Monsieur Pascal.

The following day, happy to resume their familiar life after such a romantic holiday, the workpeople returned joyfully.

Peace was signed: they came with outstretched hands. Their candour disarmed Bernard's ill will. He found it hard to believe that these men were the same who, the day before, had howled at the gates of the deserted mill. He questioned those whom, up to the strike, he had taken for real friends, who had gained his esteem and whose confidence he had thought he deserved.

"Now you, Heurtematte, why did you leave us like that, on the second day? You have seen enough of us to know that we're not the men to

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

compel children to work or to risk blowing up the mill, now haven't you?"

"O me, Monsieur Bernard, I didn't believe a word of all that . . . Only, to make no bones of it, I didn't want to be no more of a scab than my mates."

CHAPTER TWENTY



IN June, 1920, Françoise asked her husband with gentle insistence to take a villa for her at Deauville. Her sister, Madame de Thianges, was going to spend the summer there; she had hardly seen her since the war; the sea-air would be good for the children; and she herself needed a change of air.

Antoine struggled for long. He would only be able to go to Deauville on Sundays; he loathed all that fashionable life; no Quesnay had ever removed his household in that manner far from the hallowed shade of the smoke-stacks; Monsieur Achille would think the idea scandalous. But Antoine's greatest fear was that in other surroundings Françoise would conceive a disgust for the life of Pont-de-l'Eure.

"But why?" he kept on repeating dejectedly.

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"The children are all right in the country. They look perfectly well."

"Shall we say, if you prefer, that I would like it? . . . Isn't that enough?"

Because he was weak, he gave way in the end, but so tardily and ungracefully that she did not even feel he did it to give her pleasure. Monsieur Achille shrugged his shoulders; he had made up his mind to consider the case of Françoise as hopeless. She went off at the beginning of July.

Since the strike the mill had adopted the system of a weekly half-holiday, and Antoine had promised to be at Deauville every Saturday by five o'clock; but he had a new car to which he had fitted so many improvements that, in the end, it wouldn't go at all. On the first Saturday he arrived at seven o'clock, covered in mud. On the apple-trees with their belt of white palings, on the pink geraniums the rain was falling, steady and hard.

"There you are at last!" said his wife. "You'll

only just have time to dress; we're dining at Hélène's."

"O, I say!" said Antoine, "I'm fagged out. I haven't seen you for a week. I was looking forward to playing with the children. No; telephone to her that we're not coming."

"That's out of the question; we shall wreck her whole table. Besides," she continued, in a tone of the most winning reassurance, like a mother comforting a child, "you'll see, there'll be a very amusing little party there: Lambert-Leclerc and his wife . . . *he's* Under-Secretary of State in the Victualling Department, *she's* Sabine Leclerc that was, who was at boarding-school with me. It's jolly seeing Sabine again, she's delightful, a bit outspoken. Then there's Fabert, the playwright, you know, the man who wrote *The Steppe*, also with his wife, and, besides, a young musician, Jean Philippe Montel, who is a marvel. He does parodies at the piano; you'll see, it's too funny for words."

"How frightful!" said Antoine, terror-stricken.

But Françoise's good humour was not to be shaken; ever since morning, she had been re-

peating to herself: “I must be nice to Antoine . . .” She was happy, she was having a good time, she was grateful to him for it, and she wanted him to share her pleasure.

“At the Casino I’ll show you the most delicious little Spanish women, all powdered and painted, and the beautiful Lady Diana Manners. . . . This morning at the *Potinière* there were some lovely dresses; people admire mine a lot, you know, specially the white and red. I don’t look too much like Pont-de-l’Eure; you won’t have to blush on my account.”

Antoine listened to her in utter despair. His most secret apprehensions were justified; he had foreseen that she would take a liking to this kind of life. It was natural: she was so pretty, she must feel an intoxicating pleasure at being noticed in such a crowd of women. But he, Antoine, would have wished to bury himself with so much beauty in some hidden retreat. He felt himself unworthy to keep her, if, in order to please her, he would have to sustain comparison with brilliant men. Perhaps he would have done better to tell her all this candidly, but he was

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

timid, and his timidity drove him to the garage and the workshop. Realizing that the game was up, he sighed and went off to dress.

Although the Thianges' villa was quiet close at hand, they had to take the car to get there, because Françoise was wearing silver shoes. Antoine was gloomy and silent. He always had the impression that his brother-in-law Thianges treated him with rather a contemptuous condescension. He was wrong: Maurice de Thianges had a patronizing tone of voice which he could no more change than the shape of his eyebrows. Hélène was not so good-looking as Françoise, but was much liked because of her natural wit, gently mocking and void of malice. She had many friends in the most diverse circles; she collected celebrities. Antoine found Lambert-Leclerc pretentious and Fabert disappointing; the young musician Montel, whom everyone called Jean Philippe, he disliked particularly, because, in so little time, he seemed to have become great friends with Françoise.

At table he found himself between Madame

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Lambert-Leclerc and Madame Fabert; they both terrified him. The minister's wife was young, intelligent and caustic; the other was a fat, well-meaning lady, but wanted to talk about actors he'd never heard of. He listened and never said a word. The rapidity of the conversation made him rather giddy. These people seemed to have read everything, seen everything and knew the whole world. One of them had an anecdote to tell in connexion with every new name which a chance phrase brought into play. The moment a man's voice was silent, Hélène de Thianges' clear little voice set out like a kind of shuttle, carrying across the table the thread of the conversation to him who was to throw it back. Lambert-Leclerc talked about the Foreign Debt and told amusing stories about the Peace Conference. Then, without Antoine's being able to notice "how it was done," Jean Philippe was found in possession of the stage, with his paradoxes about negro music. Which Thianges followed up with negro sculpture.

"No one," said he, "has the sense of three dimensions more than the negroes."

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

‘Good God!’ said Antoine to himself. ‘And why?’

But, during the second in which his attention had wandered, the chase had gone off on a new scent. They were now talking about the way in which artists received their inspiration.

“The subject of *The Steppe*?” Fabert was saying. “It is an anecdote I heard when I was sixteen and which I fostered slowly with everything I experienced. As a general rule, you do no good with a theme unless it has gone through the normal period of gestation in the mind. A novelist makes use of his childhood or his youth, rarely of his years of discretion. The novel of old age has never been written ‘from inside’ . . . It hasn’t the time to mature.”

“And the musicians?” said Hélène, throwing the shuttle to Jean Philippe.

“O, that’s quite different. A theme is provided for you by chance, or by nature. Now, that tune from my operetta,” he continued, turning to Françoise, “which I was playing to you last night and which you liked, I picked it up one

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

day on the boulevards, walking past the Café Napolitain. Two saucers fell down and spun round on the marble top of a table; it sounded like 'tu-lu, tu-lu, tu-lu' . . . I'd got my theme. It's all very queer."

"But do you remember?" said Françoise. "Wagner tells how the *cor anglais motif* for *Tristan* was given him one night in Venice by a gondolier's cry?"

And she smiled at Antoine, as if to apologize for herself.

'She too!' he thought.

She was utterly different from the Françoise of Pont-de-l'Eure or Fleuré. She seemed to open out like a flower that has found favourable surroundings. Antoine would have liked to rejoice at it, but his own silence exasperated him. Not that he lacked culture; he had read much, more perhaps than any of the men present, but it was his habit to think slowly and in solitude. And now that he pondered it, that question of inspiration, he too could tell a tale or two. Flaubert, for instance, had got the idea for *L'Education sentimentale* one day at a funeral. . . Mean-

while the conversation went its way: roman-
esque cathedrals, English poets, Chinese vases.
When Antoine again paid heed, having polished
his anecdote, it was too late; they were talking
of love.

"I believe," said Fabert, "that we are return-
ing to much simpler manners, much closer to
those of the Ancients. At the seaside, men and
women are once more adopting the habit of liv-
ing naked—which makes desire less active and
less dangerous. We must not forget that this
extraordinary mixture of modesty and provoca-
tiveness, instinct and sentiment, which we call
Romantic Love, is quite a novel combination:
it has been in existence for eight hundred years
and will perhaps vanish very quickly."

"That will be a pity," said Hélène.

"O no," said Jean Philippe, "we shall not even
notice it. Our descendants will find it as natural
to separate desire from affection as we to com-
bine them."

"It's very pleasant, all the same," said Fran-
çoise.

Fabert leaned over and murmured a few words

in a whisper to Hélène de Thianges, who burst out laughing.

“You make me blush,” said she.

Jean Philippe was talking with Françoise. Antoine’s anger was so obvious that his sister-in-law cast him a glance of reproach and attempted in vain to make him talk. His sulky silence was embarrassing the whole table. Françoise felt it and was ashamed.

‘Really,’ she thought, ‘Antoine is impossible! He does not make the slightest effort to please me. I have been very happy the last five days, away from Pont-de-l’Eure and from him.’

As soon as they left the table, she went to sit with Jean Philippe in front of the piano. Antoine came up and propped himself on his elbows without speaking to them. Françoise got up. Fabert, who had watched the scene, came to her rescue and led her away to a divan.

“I must ask you a question,” said he. “I am curious to know if there is a heroine in fiction with whom you feel you have traits in common—an affinity?”

❧ ❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧ ❧

"Certainly," said Françoise passionately,
"Anna Karenina!"

"What I was thinking," said Fabert with a kind of compassion.

He talked to her for some time. The moment he had gone, Antoine took his place.

"What has he been saying to you?"

She looked at him angrily:

"He has told me things about myself which have surprised and frightened me."

"Let us be off! Come along!" said Antoine curtly.

"What? But we've only just left the table and we're all to go and see Fabert's play at the Casino."

"I am not feeling the thing; I can't stay. Do you hear, Françoise; I *can't* stay."

He looked so upset, that she feared a scene in public and gave way. Their departure left the Thianges and their guests astonished and saddened.

A little later Jean Philippe spoke of them to Hélène de Thianges:

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“How different from your sister her husband is!”

“Yes, isn’t he? He was unbearable this evening. We have never understood what she wanted to marry him for. There were family difficulties, but she was mad about him. Of course, he’s a good-looking man, and at that time he was an officer in the army, and also, precisely because our families were at odds, Françoise thought the match romantic.”

“Shall we see them to-morrow?” said Jean Philippe.

“Now,” said Hélène with a laugh, “you leave her alone.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ANTOINE remained a long time in the little drawing-room of the villa without daring to go to Françoise in their room. In a corner there was a small library in which he found *Les Origines de la France contemporaine*. He read several chapters or, at any rate, turned over the pages in an attempt to calm himself.

‘“These staircases at Versailles so wide that eighty ladies in panniered skirts . . .” It is out of the question,’ he thought, ‘I cannot leave her here by herself: God knows whom the Thianges’ won’t yet have at their house before the summer is out. The freedoms of this Parisian society are dangerous, yes, dangerous. Françoise is straight: she will understand . . . *Will* she understand? She is so changed already. O why hadn’t I the necessary will to prevent her coming here!’

At last, about midnight, he made up his mind to go upstairs and talk to her.

‘Perhaps she’ll be asleep.’

He wished she might be, but she was not asleep. She had gone to bed, had kept the light on, however, and was waiting without even reading. Her face had a very serious expression: she had been crying.

“You are not tired, are you?” said he. “I may have a talk with you?”

She looked at him fixedly without replying. He continued: “I have been thinking it over. I fancy you will agree with me. It isn’t suitable for you to remain at Deauville alone. Your sister will be having a whole heap of people at her villa—bachelors, artists . . . She has her husband about and that is perfectly all right, but you . . . without meaning to be, you will be compromised . . . I should be too uneasy about you . . . We should have no difficulty in subletting the villa for the month of August.”

“Have you gone mad?” said she coldly.

“What makes you say that?”

“You believe that I shall return to Pont-de-l’Eure in August, deprive myself of society I find entertaining, yes, entertaining, simply because you are not brilliant and are jealous? Never, do you hear, never! Now I am going to make you another proposal, Antoine: I too have been thinking it over during the last two hours. I am sick of passing my youth buried in the country, tied to a man to whom I am of less account than his chimney-pots and his looms. I still have a few years of youth left. I want to live. Give me my freedom: I will bring up my children; you will be quite taken up by your cloth and your wool, since nothing else in the world exists for you.”

The discussion became very violent. Françoise painted a portrait of the Quesnays, terrible, unjust and truthful. A flood of petty grievances seemed to gush out with irresistible force from these two tormented hearts.

‘What am I saying?’ Antoine kept thinking, ‘what am I saying? How did this all start?’

But he could not hold in his words. At last the truth appeared clearly to both of them: they

hated one another, they had nothing more in common. They fell silent.

Antoine mournfully passed his hand over his forehead: “My head is too bad; I must take a turn outside; I want air.”

He went out; the rain had stopped. An immense starry sky covered the sleeping villas. It was certainly very late. At the Normandy a few lights still outlined the drawn blinds; only the Casino blazed out, a liner on the high seas. Antoine turned his back on it and walked towards the sea. The tide was coming in with a slow, soft lapping. The beach was deserted. He lay down on the sand. In the distance, over towards Le Havre, a lighthouse revolved. ‘One, two, three, four, five—flash . . . One, two, three, four, five—flash. This rhythm tranquilized him somewhat; then, stretching himself out backwards, he had the sensation of plunging into the midst of the stars. He called them by their names: ‘The Little Bear, the Pole-Star . . . That sort of chair, I have forgotten its name . . . The Pleiades winking. How beautiful it is!’ The silence did him good, and also

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

the immensity of sky and sea, their indifference. It was as if he had before him some gigantic companion, tender and dumb.

‘And now,’ said he, ‘what has happened? What was the starting-point? All this is childish. It is like an absurd dream. I love Françoise dearly.’

He thought of her little crazes, her love of flowers and of old stuffs, of certain delicious expressions she had when looking at the children. ‘Everything,’ he thought, ‘I love everything about her, even her “Pascal-Bouchet” side, as Bernard would say. Perhaps that especially. I am grateful to her for being different from me . . . But how about this evening? . . . When I got here, at seven o’clock, she was as usual . . . It was afterwards . . . at that dinner-party.’

He closed his eyes, trying to remember. The sound of the breaking wave was like a caress.

‘No, all this lies farther back; she has been drifting away from me for the last two years, and the fault is mine. When I married her, she admired me; I represented a force in her eyes,

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

first because of my tales of the war, and especially because I braved my family in marrying her . . . That's it . . . I raised hopes in her of a great, heroic love. And I haven't stayed the course, on account of the Quesnays. The moment I am inside the works, I am dominated, impotent. Up against grandfather and even Bernard, when he speaks to me in a particular way, I have no courage. Some women require an immense surrender; Françoise has discovered pettiness in me . . . I have felt it and have not dared talk about it, and I have fled to this life of reading and tinkering . . . And, all the same, I should have been ready to die for her . . . Yes, certainly . . . I must . . .'

He stood up and started walking rapidly over the sand towards the villa.

'There is going to be a change in all this . . . But how could I ever think that the mill, that Grandfather Achille are things of greater importance than the sky, the sea and, in particular, than Françoise? I really must have gone mad.'

On nearing the house, he started to run. A lighted window stood open; coming up, he saw

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Françoise leaning out. “Is it you?” she said. She had been frightened. On seeing him go out into the night, she had imagined absurdities, possible suicide, death; and then she too had found a gigantic, tender companion, who had put everything back into its true perspective. Had she been absolutely in the right? Had she not a spice of coquetry to reproach herself with? During the week preceding Antoine’s arrival she had been much too intimate with this Jean Philippe. She knew quite well that if he stayed a few days longer he would become enterprising. The other day already, at the piano, his hands . . . During that time Antoine was toiling at Pont-de-l’Eure, and toiling for her and the children. At bottom she loved him very much. He had taught her everything really solid and serious that she knew. He was very good, very simple; if she could have torn him away out of his grandfather’s influence, he would have been perfect. Poor Antoine! How miserable she must have made him!

She went back to bed; when he came in, he dropped down on his knees near the bed without

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

saying a word and took Françoise's hand, which he kissed with a sort of fervour. Then she raised herself a little and, with her left hand, softly stroked his hair. He saw that he was forgiven.

“Now tell me what you want. We will live in the way you like.”

“No, no,” said she, “I want nothing. If it can give you any satisfaction, I will leave Deauville to-morrow.”

“What an idea! Not a bit of it! Stay all the summer; I will come over oftener. Grandpapa can make a rumpus . . . Much good may it do him!”

She smiled.

“I love to see you like that; one thing I ask of you: try to belong to me more than to them.”

“I will try,” said Antoine and kissed her. Under the pink silk of her night-dress she was warm and unresisting.

They woke up at daybreak; for they had left the window open. It was a blue morning. On the horizon sea and sky merged in a silvery mist.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Monsieur Achille had announced that he would come over to spend Sunday. The pleasures of indignation attracted him in these abodes of offence. Antoine said to Françoise: “If it bores you, I will look after him. You can stay with your sister.” She protested: “Why, not in the least. On the contrary, it will be most amusing to see Monsieur Achille at the *Potinière*.”

He arrived about eleven o'clock, driven by Bernard. The sea was grey, slate-grey and dove-grey, the sky spanned by a flight of pink clouds; the yellow, coral, flame-coloured dresses made gay spots of colour on the drab sands. Monsieur Achille refused to take a chair. A voice behind him called out cheerfully: “Monsieur Quesnay, your humble servant!”

Turning round, he beheld a young man with his hair thrown back by a graceful movement, whose very wide-open shirt afforded a view of his smooth chest. The idea that this androgynous apparition could pretend to his acquaintance filled him with violent fury. He hurled a black look of surprise at the creature. But the low-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

necked being remained unmoved: for it was Monsieur Jean Vanekem.

He had taken at Deauville a villa embowered in geraniums, which sheltered a whole harem of typists. Thence he dispatched to the markets of the world orders for triumphant purchases.

As he had pronounced his own name, Monsieur Achille regretfully put out a finger to the proffered hand and grunted a hostile Good morning.

“Well, Monsieur Quesnay,” said the athlete familiarly, “do you believe in the rise now? Combed is up to a hundred francs.”

“Don’t rely on it too much,” growled Monsieur Achille. “The old ewe isn’t dead yet. There’ll be a general break sooner than you think.”

“You won’t take things seriously,” said the other with regret. “I am coming to see you one of these days at Pont-de-l’Eure. I have a splendid proposition to put to you . . . The Ko-Ko-Noo paper-mills . . . A factory in the heart of Africa . . . Labour for nothing and forests of

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

raw material . . . See you later, then . . . Remember me kindly to my cousin Lecourbe."

Between two pretty girls, each complementary to the other—a blonde in a violet jumper, a brunette in a straw-coloured jumper—Monsieur Vanekem disappeared with elastic step along the plankway.

"Who's he?" asked Françoise astounded.

"That?" said Monsieur Achille contemptuously. "That's my greatest debtor, walking about with his chest bare."

Standing with his alpaca jacket gleaming in the sun, he watched with sarcastic mien the tennis-players arrayed in white flannel, the women, whose breasts made little peaks under the stretched material of their bathing-dresses, and the brilliance of this swarming, useless crowd. Françoise thought that he looked like some old magician to whom all these mad folk had forgotten to send an invitation and who, with a gesture, was about to transform them into toads.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ANTOINE got into the way of not returning to Pont-de-l'Eure before the Monday. In his eyes the life of the mill had, all of a sudden, become as it were far-away and monotone. He was like a man who has for long had magnifying glasses before his eyes and who, suddenly dropping them, sees objects recede from him and assume their true size. 'What?' he kept saying to himself. 'Is this all?' He was already thinking of next Sunday. He experienced again a sensation of his young days when he was a soldier and the week went by in the expectation of leave. In those days Sundays alone counted; so now—the post, the round through the work-rooms, the purchases of wool became compulsory exercises, as tiresome and futile as bayonet-practice, and real living was confined to the few precious hours in which he was with Françoise again.

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

Towards the end of July, as he was leaving the mill with Bernard, a wool-broker called out from a distance: "Wool's down in London, gentlemen." In the same way, six years before, a friend on opening *Le Temps* had said to them negligently: "Hullo! They have murdered the heir-apparent of Austria."

At that moment the madness of buying was at its apex, and the speculators, intent on their game, did not see the mountains of wool accumulated beyond the seas in the Argentine *haciendas*, in the Australian farms, ready to topple down over Europe.

The slump at London was slight, an undulation hardly visible in the rising curve of prices, but it fell into a market so loaded with stocks that it damped every ardour, just as a speck is sufficient to precipitate a supersaturated solution. The merchants who had over-bought lost their heads at the first onset and asked for their orders to be cancelled. Monsieur Lecourbe received them proudly. "There will still remain enough of them."

But the contagion was rapid, the epidemic for-

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

midable. The newspapers proclaimed a speedy return to pre-war prices. A conspiracy of thrift leagued the consumers against the producers' greed. To wear a worn-out jacket, to have a shabby overcoat turned, became a mark of virtue. From snobbery the newly-rich ceased their squandering. Vanekem's friend, Liliane Fontaine, wrote to Bernard Quesnay: "Could you send me some beige gabardine? I want to make myself a little frock." On every side stocks emerged like rats on a sinking ship. Came the Antwerp sales. There prices rushed down the hill at full speed.

Like a train coming to a stop over an obstacle (and the first splintered coach becomes itself a danger to the second, against which the third is smashed to pieces), so the militant zeal of the shopkeepers came to nought against the stolid obstinacy of the consumers; against the overflowing shops the force of the factories vainly dashed itself, and the factories, energetically applying the brakes, received the unavailing impact of the wool-producing countries.

The transition from prosperity to want, like

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

all the great tragic catastrophes, was made in the sharp, theatrical manner that Fate commands. At the beginning of a month, an excessively flourishing and wealthy industry was disdainfully refusing orders for which it had no use; at the end of the same month, that industry felt its back to the wall, with a stoppage imminent. As on the morrow of defeat a routed general contemplates his battered line, examines one after the other the points on which he believed he could rely and comprehends in a flash that all this apparent strength was nothing but weakness, each of the fortified posts being of use only with the support of all the others, so the two Quesnay brothers, turning over their order-books devastated by blue-pencil fire, found on all hands the too certain foretokens of the crash.

“It is a serious business,” Antoine said to Françoise. “If this goes on, we shall be ruined.”

She received the news very cheerfully.

“It is all the same to me,” said she. “I shall set to work. I’ll make hats and dresses. It would be fun.”

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

In the Fastness of Drapery woebegone customers showed Bernard pile upon pile of stuffs, gigantic and redoubtable.

"Give you work for your looms? . . . My poor man, just look for yourself! My cellars and attics are full of cloth . . . and I have three thousand pieces of it yet to come . . . I have fabrics to last me two years!"

"Those piles," exclaimed young Saint-Clair, whom the Quesnays loved for the vigour and directness of his language. "Those piles! They fairly put the wind up me . . . If some bloke comes piddling round in the morning to buy three yards of blue cloth, he sends 'em back again in the evening, on the pretext that he thought it was yellow . . . And the damned piles are as they were."

Monsieur Roch, on his dignity, received the ambassador from Pont-de-l'Eure with no great graciousness:

"Is this some joke of yours, my young friend? I myself hold stocks to the value of twenty millions. What do you want me to buy for?"

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"Monsieur Roch, it is no deal I am putting to you, but a service that I ask of you. I have a thousand hands, and they must have their livelihood . . . You were my father's best friend . . ."

"Of course, of course, my boy . . . But your father has nothing to do with the case . . . The point at issue is not a question of sentiment, but to discover whether or no I can meet my creditors. Business is not carried on by dint of family souvenirs."

To Monsieur Cavé senior Bernard proposed to manufacture the heavy, well-gummed materials desired, for their burnouses, by the Arabs of Algeria.

"Too late, Monsieur Quesnay. Algeria is no longer in the market. They have had a bad harvest over there; the Arabs are suffering from a corn-famine . . . It is your fault . . . If you had deigned to turn out the article at the time I told you to, you would have established a position for yourselves, but all you have ever been capable of doing at your mill is staring at your own navels."

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

For two long days Bernard explored Paris, astonished at his own ardour in pursuing buyers who eluded him after all. As happens with lovers, the difficulty of the undertaking began to give him an appetite for it

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



HE had a *rendez-vous* with Simone at five o'clock in a studio she had taken and where she often received him. At noon he got a telephone-message from Pont-de-l'Eure that Monsieur Roch wanted to see him again and would expect him at five o'clock sharp.

'What a bore Roch is!' he thought. 'I have seen him this morning. What can he want? I won't go . . . or I'll go to-morrow . . . But to-morrow they're expecting me at the mill, and I have promised Monsieur Cantaert to see that boiler-engineer with him. All the same, Roch is a very important matter. . . How you vex me!' he said to himself, 'you trouble all my pleasures . . . Perhaps Simone will be free earlier. That would settle everything.'

At half-past three he rang at the studio-door. She opened and said: "But how nice of you to

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

come early!” and was, all of a sudden, very gay, very animated. On an easel stood the outline of a fair woman in a black dress with a narrow belt, striped red and bright blue.

“What a pretty dress!” said Bernard.

“I am glad you say that; it is the dress that I wanted to paint. At the moment, I am mad on stuffs, on hats. It seems to me that there is a whole poetry in them which has not yet been expressed. I have even amused myself painting the shop-windows on the boulevards. Look . . .”

“Yes,” said Bernard. “Excellent! But are you not afraid that it might turn into a fashion-plate?”

“With due proportion, dear boy, it is as if you had asked Monet: ‘Are you not afraid that Chartres Cathedral might turn into a picture-postcard?’ One must never be afraid of the commonplaceness of a subject, if it really moves one. Do you think that before Berthe Morisot and Monet people would have dared paint household utensils, garden-seats, railway-engines? At the first Utrillos you see you say to yourself: ‘What

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

a funny idea; that is all far from beautiful.' And then, all of a sudden, in a Paris suburb, you find yourself in love with a school or a hospital or a *café* and observe: 'Look, an Utrillo . . .' You, who are a Norman, haven't you seen in the Rouen gallery that delightful canvas of Blanche's, representing a London shop?"

"What I like about your art," said Bernard, "is that you paint very straightforwardly. I don't know the technical terms, but I mean to say that it isn't jarring, doesn't go out of its way to be crude. In nature transitions always appear to me as gentle, and it seems to me that many painters, sometimes the greatest, refuse to see it, in order to be more powerful. Do you understand what I mean to say?"

"Of course. I am like you; I am very susceptible to the 'smooth side' of things . . . Only, you must be careful: there are two sorts of smooth—that of Vermeer and the great Italians, which overlies an expressed relief and is authentic, and then there is that of Bouguereau or of Cabanel, which is smooth because it is flat . . . As for me, I do my best . . . Look, I am

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

pretty well satisfied with that woman's shoulder . . .”

Bernard, who was behind her, softly placed his lips on the nape of her neck and slipped down her dress, uncovering her shoulders striated with violet-coloured ribbon.

“Darling,” he said, “how lovely you are!”

Half an hour later he softly lifted up Simone's head, which was lying on his shoulder, raised his wrist above his mistress's body and gently turned it. She opened her eyes.

“You're looking at the time? Already?”

“Yes,” said Bernard, somewhat shamefacedly. “I did not dare tell you: I have to go earlier.”

“I guessed that some time ago . . . You came at half-past three . . . Well, to whom am I to be sacrificed?”

He explained, very precisely.

“And you weren't able to put off this Roch until to-morrow? It is I then who always have to take a back seat? O, you are hateful at times. Be careful, Bernard my boy, one of these days it will all be up. I shall not warn you in

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

advance; you will get a letter, and that will be the end."

"That will prove that you do not love me."

"No, I don't love you. It is only a well-played comedy. I shall get on very well without you. Why should I love you? You are neither amiable, nor amusing, nor attentive. I know a hundred men more seductive than you. If I had not met you during the war, at a time when I was in need of being loved and when, moreover, you were quite different, I should not have noticed you."

Bernard looked at her, a little uneasy; the Quesnays were bad at understanding irony. She enjoyed his surprised look for an instant, then folded herself in his arms.

"But I do, I do love you."

Monsieur Roch waited that evening in vain. But when he caught his train back to Pont-de-l'Eure, Bernard felt very dissatisfied with himself. 'That's not going to happen again,' he thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“ES,” said Monsieur Achille, “too many idiots have made money: we must have a clean-up. One country hasn’t room for many big fortunes. Before the war industry was a difficult undertaking. With much labour you hardly got five or six per cent for your money; the idlers went smash. That was as it should be.”

With his son-in-law and his grandsons he examined the means by which they might go on working. One by one the orders remaining on the books were subjected to a severe scrutiny.

“Boisselot? We must cancel him. He won’t be able to get out of it. He has got stocks to the tune of eighteen million, on which he will lose six million. No pre-war capital. Done for! . . . Pity, a good chap . . . Bemma of Cas-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

tres? Yes . . . he'll leave his feathers behind, but he will get out of it . . . His war-damages will be a nice feather-bed for him . . . Fabrics Limited? . . . Registered address . . . A managing director . . . No confidence. Cross them off . . . Cernay? He will lose a lot, but he knows what work is. We shall have to take the bull by the horns and ask him how he stands . . .”

The incoherence of such metaphors beguiled Bernard's anguish. Monsieur Lecourbe was lavish of them: “The tail is eating up the head. We must put our rifle to the other shoulder. We shall swallow up all we've got, but we shall land on our feet.”

“What is the upshot?” Bernard interrupted. “How long will our orders last us?”

“A month.”

“We must get hold of more, then, or close down,” said Monsieur Achille.

“Close down! . . . And the hands? . . . A stoppage at the onset of winter?”

Monsieur Achille turned over the leaves of the order-book in silence, then went on:

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"We can go on working at cost-price . . . certainly . . . We can help the hands in a stoppage with canteens and the like . . . certainly . . . But we cannot accumulate stocks . . . To fail helps no one and nothing. If you want to keep your employees, find markets. You are young."

A swift movement of the bony, hairy old hand dismissed the meeting. Bernard was the first to leave. In the mill yard, where the bundles of yarn and barrels of oil already stood sparser, he met his sister-in-law.

"Good morning, Bernard . . . I am looking for Antoine. I require some flannel for the mites in my *crèche*."

"Antoine? I have just left him; he will still be busy with the post."

"With your grandfather? No, thank you. I am not going there."

"Are you afraid of Monsieur Achille, Françoise?"

"Afraid? No . . . But when he sees me in the mill he always looks as if he thought me the temptress who will lure away the two of you

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

from the Paradise of the Quesnays . . . That man has no soul, Bernard."

"All the same, he is a great force . . . Where should we be to-day without him?"

"Poor Antoine is in an awful humour . . . Are things really going so badly for you?"

"Listen to the looms . . . Monsieur Achille declares that when he comes into the mill he knows his position at once by that rhythm. When the work is urgent, the workman isn't: money is easy to make, jobs easy to get. They stop for a word with a neighbour, to eat a bite. One end of the room stops running, another starts off again . . . as in those modern symphonies, you know—those in which the calls of the instruments rise in unexpected spasms . . . But when the market is dull, when the master, at his wits' end with accumulating a ruinous amount of stock, wants to produce as little as possible, then the workman works for all he's worth. We are in a very bad way."

"So these poor folk will soon be playing, will they, Bernard?"

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"I am afraid so. All the same, I have got together a good exhibit. Come and look at it."

By staircases and bridges he took her along to his office. On a long wooden counter he spread out innumerable bundles. There were rough tweeds there, flecked with red, green and blue; soft wool saxonies with their delicate shades shot by brightly coloured silks—orange, violet and red—at one and the same time effective and invisible.

"That is very pretty, Bernard; I should much like a tailor-made of that silvery-grey . . . Are you proud of it?"

"Well, to be honest, I am. After all, a beautiful material is as beautiful as a beautiful piece of tapestry or even as a beautiful poem. It is always a matter of selection, arrangement and proportion. And then, to have made something yourself—that's happiness, don't you find?"

"Perhaps," said Françoise sadly. "I try to think so. You see, I am busying myself with this *crèche*; I have taken on your grandmother's good works; I do what I can."

"I do see it and I am very glad of it," said

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Bernard. “I have never said anything about it to you, but I have thought that your life had an æsthetic side which was not altogether authentic . . . Of course, to have the finest curtains and the finest plate is jolly while you are about it, but after that it is a very negative pleasure. What we need is to forget our own existence. I often get here at eight o'clock in the morning and, when the hooter blows at twelve, I feel as if I had been at work for five minutes. So life goes by.”

“It goes by perhaps without one's having properly relished it.”

He spread out his arms a little way and pulled a disdainful face.

“Do you think so? What is there to relish? *‘A tale told by an idiot.’* . . No we must not think about it.”

“Monsieur Bernard,” a clerk came to say, “Monsieur Jean Vanekem wishes to see you in the warehouse.”

“Please excuse me, Françoise,” said he.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



MONSIEUR JEAN VANEKEM, a little vexed at having to wait, was pacing the warehouse with a nonchalant air. He was dressed in a light-coloured overcoat, drawn in under his bosom like ladies' dresses in the days of the First Empire, had a felt hat of a delicate grey on his head and, on his feet, boots of pale buckskin. He adorned his face—the face of the juvenile lead in an American film—with a condescending smile when Bernard Quesnay joined him.

“Good morning, my dear fellow. I asked to see my cousin Lecourbe, but your clerks told me he was away, and I took the liberty of disturbing you. Besides, what I have to tell him concerns you equally . . . Are you keeping well? Have you seen Liliane in *L'Adventurière*? She is charming in it.”

Bernard took him to the office, which he meas-

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

ured with a sweeping and rather disdainful glance; he let himself sink very gracefully into an arm-chair.

“My dear fellow, you know as well as I that the present state of things has put the best houses in a bad way. Although my dealings have always been perfectly sound, the accumulation of stocks on the one hand and stagnant markets on the other hand make it impossible for me to meet my engagements with all the exactitude I could wish. I know that with the terms on which we are, you and I, these things are of no consequence; nevertheless, in view of the fact that I owe you a pretty considerable sum, I thought it, with possibly exaggerated scrupulousness, my duty to put you *au courant* with the exact state of my affairs. . .”

Bernard listened to him with surprise and suspicion. ‘What is he driving at? Has he come with all this assurance and grand manner to inform me that he is filing his petition? In that case, this display is very much out of place . . . He owes us nearly a million. Monsieur Achille will laugh . . .’

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Indeed?" he said out loud. "I do not altogether understand what you mean by the state of your affairs."

"Yet it is very simple, my dear fellow. There is nothing disquieting about my position: I have it well in hand, provided I can make a valuation of my goods and securities at cost-price. And here's my balance-sheet. . ."

He took out of his pocket a little piece of paper, which he handed to Bernard.

"You see," he said, "the position is altogether healthy and, provided I am given time to liquidate . . ."

Bernard raised his eyes and gazed with stupefaction at Monsieur Vanechem's handsome, plump face wreathed in smiles.

"Your position is altogether healthy, you say?" he remarked. "Why, sir, you are virtually bankrupt!"

Monsieur Vanechem appeared more grieved than angered by such regrettable lack of tact.

"Bankrupt! . . ." he said indulgently. "You must imagine that we are living in the time of Balzac, my dear fellow. People do not go bank-

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

rupt nowadays. I may perhaps be compelled to apply for the voluntary liquidation of my concern, but I do not think I shall. I imagine that my creditors, among whom I take at once pleasure and concern in reckoning yourself, would find it to their advantage to accept by amicable arrangement a dividend of thirty to forty francs in the hundred. Do you not agree with me?"

"It is not my business to take any decision in this matter . . . I shall explain the position to my grandfather this very evening, and I will let you know . . ."

Monsieur Vanequem appeared a trifle put out.

"As you please; but you will understand that I absolutely must know where I stand. If all the world has to be consulted, manœuvring becomes difficult. So I shall rely on you to write to me this evening."

"What are the Ko-Ko-Noo shares worth?" said Bernard, exasperated. "They represent an important part of your assets and, moreover, thanks to you, we are shareholders ourselves . . ."

"Ko-Ko-Noo," said Monsieur Vanequem, "is a

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

first-class enterprise, but it is not in full swing yet. The small capital hitherto subscribed has served primarily to pay for certain financial and political co-operation and to send out some exploratory expeditions into the Lower Congo to determine sites for the factories. The latter are not yet built. We are shortly to increase the capital by four times the old amount, and those who hold shares already will be entitled to four new shares at the issue-price: a gift . . . Upon which note, my good friend, I will leave you to your labours. I must go over to Louviers to see Monsieur Pascal Bouchet, whom I equally have the pleasure of counting among my purveyors."

He held out a hand gloved in supple reindeer-hide. Bernard accompanied him as far as the gate of the mill. A chauffeur in a white rubber cape opened the door of a fine low coupé with long straight ilnes.

"A Cadillac from war-stocks," said Monsieur Vanekem modestly. "Yes, it's a nice little car."

As he looked upon the noble cloud of dust in which Monsieur Vanekem was enveloping his form divine and the last days of his gilded glory,

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Bernard thought not without hilarity of the certain fury of Monsieur Achille when the Twilight of the God was announced to him, and of the lecture to which Monsieur Lecourbe would have to listen for having made the Quesnays pull an oar in that galley.

He knew that his progenitor was on his rounds in the spinning-mill by the water-side and lay in wait for him.

"So there you are . . ." said Monsieur Achille. "On the road I passed that Vanequem's car; he drives like a lunatic. Has he been here? What does he want now?"

"He does *not* want to pay the six hundred thousand francs he owes us. He showed me an altogether delightful balance-sheet . . . with charming unconcern."

"Ha! ha!" said Monsieur Achille in triumphant tones which clearly signified, "What I foresaw has happened with a vengeance," "Ho, ho! So Vanequem is done for? Well, he owes Monsieur Pascal close on two million. He told me so himself. That's a fine business!"

And, rubbing his hands, he went off with

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

great strides, to seek out his son-in-law, fretting and fuming on principle, but completely consoled for his own loss by the satisfaction of having foretold it and by the much heavier loss of his friend and crony.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

N the Paris train Monsieur Lecourbe and his nephew Bernard met Monsieur Pascal Bouchet. The morning sun made the silver roofs of the farms sparkle; a rich brown mist enveloped the trees as in a landscape by Turner.

Monsieur Lecourbe, who was depressed, talked about "the situation."

"It is frightful. The best houses are in jeopardy . . . Do you know that Cavé has called together his creditors? He is asking for five years in which to pay; his stock amounts to thirty million. A house dating from 1805! A man who couldn't get collars high enough for him! . . . And Roch and Lozeron—people are talking about them too. But who isn't being talked about? My cousin Vanechem, a boy who hadn't a penny before the war, who had the

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

chance of making a fortune, is going to lose it all again, idiot that he is. However, I must in justice give myself the credit of always having sized him up properly . . . What do you expect? Everybody has been pulling too hard at the string, and it has snapped. Up to a certain point and in a certain degree, we had to be prepared for it.”

“The string has not snapped,” said Monsieur Pascal. “This post-war Europe of ours is more like a violin-chord that has been plucked too roughly: it is in vibration. We have got no farther than the first oscillation; for twenty years we shall witness ups and downs, ups and downs of decreasing magnitude. Then everything will remain calm again until the next upheaval. Everything settles itself.”

“Nothing settles itself,” said Monsieur Le-courbe. “Depression begets depression. The only consumer is the working man, and now he is earning nothing. The peasant has money, but the country never buys; it hoards. We are heading for disaster. The foremost economists expect a world-wide cataclysm. Besides, it was the

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

same thing after all the great wars: in 1817, in 1876. . .”

“The world has not come to an end,” said Monsieur Pascal. “At present, production is very low. You are hardly working at half-pressure; I am like you. Soon demand will be great. There are still people who wear clothes.”

Through the door-window Bernard gazed at the immense plain, which a man and horse were slowly crossing. At hearing the lamentations of Monsieur Lecourbe, infallible in error, he took heart again.

“We are living in sad times,” said Monsieur Lecourbe tragically.

“Sad times?” protested Monsieur Pascal. “I don’t agree with you; I find these times capital. Before the war, the business-man of genius was unemployed. To-day, in order to survive, a man must have intelligence and a cool head. You say we are living in the full blast of the gale? Yes, but we can swim. We are in the trough of the wave? That very fact proves that we shall rise again . . . Fools sell when everything is falling and buy when everything is rising, and

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

wonder when they are ruined . . . Listen, Bernard my lad, you are young, you are a nice boy, I'll tell you the secret of success . . . Always do the opposite of the others . . . As the majority of men are fools, you are sure to prosper."

They were nearing their destination. Already five-storied houses rose up isolated in the bare fields, like tooting in an unfinished citadel. Watteau was ceding to Cézanne. Beneath the June sun suburban odds and ends of terrifying beauty were throwing hard, angular shadows. Asnières station, self-important and ridiculous, encircled the train with its endless platforms.

"Ah," said Monsieur Pascal, "here we are . . . We shall shortly behold our worthy customers once more."

"The situation," said Monsieur Lecourbe, putting on his overcoat, "will have to be stabilized, one way or the other."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



BERNARD was to spend the evening with Simone, whose husband was away. He had not seen her for some weeks; for he had left the mill very little since the situation had become dangerous. On several occasions he had promised her to come up; unforeseen difficulties, an urgent piece of work to finish, the whims of Monsieur Achille (whom events were making irritable), had compelled him every time to postpone the meeting already agreed upon. He had suggested seeing her on Sundays, but that was the only day on which it was quite impossible for her to be free. She had written him an ironical, witty letter, not in the best of humour.

‘How will she welcome me?’ he asked himself as the taxi was taking him to the studio . . . ‘I can understand her point of view per-

fectly well. She has a bore of a husband, who dislikes going about. She needs a companion who will share her tastes . . . go out with her, take her to concerts or the theatre . . . Only, she maintains that I could live in Paris and that only the will to do so is wanting. That is not the case. A business like ours cannot be run unless one is on the spot . . . She would reply that a mill is not the purpose of life. That may be so, but then one has to make a choice. What is intolerable hypocrisy, is to assume the privileges of a class without assuming its functions. I would rather . . .'

He noticed that he was talking out loud in the taxi. 'Now, keep calm,' he said to himself, and tried to call up Simone's delicate features and the tone of her voice, which was at once clear and slightly veiled, like the high notes of a piano, when you gently press the pedal.

She did not look too greatly annoyed. She did not mention the cancelled meetings. She had prepared a funny little supper, which she served herself and shared with him.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“Now,” she said, “I’d like you to sit for me for an hour. I have always said that I would like a picture of you.”

“Why, what an idea!” said he. “Why this evening? You can’t see.”

“I can see enough for an outline-drawing. Don’t move too much.”

During the sitting she described a tea-party at which she had been that afternoon: “Madame de Noailles was there; she was charming and talked about Barrès, very well too. Then Jean Cocteau, the Pitoëffs . . .”

She had a very great gift of mimicry; not only did she reproduce voice and gestures, but she would also improvise perfectly congruous tirades for all her personations:

“There was a Spanish poet there too; he recited sonnets to us. Would you like me to recite a Spanish sonnet?”

“But do you know any Spanish?”

“Not a word, but neither did anyone there, so it will come to the same thing; I shall get the atmosphere.”

“He certainly is a very great poet,” said Ber-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

nard when she was silent again. "Let me see your sketch."

"Another five minutes. Your mouth is difficult."

"How delicious you are!" said Bernard suddenly, with obvious and ingenuous sincerity.

"You think so?" she said. "Really and truly? You would miss me if you lost me?"

"But I shall not lose you."

"But supposing you did lose me? Would you think of me? For long? How long? Three months? I am not even sure of that. You have no memory. But I—in thirty years' time I shall be able to draw you, to imitate your gestures. After all, you are not an artist . . . But I love you, just as you are. I wouldn't change anything about you, not even your nasty character. Don't try to look at your watch; this evening I mean to be pitiless. There is no one at home, and I can come in at four o'clock in the morning if I want . . . O yes, I know you get up early. Well, you'll have to be tired."

She kept him till daybreak. In the Rue Joffroy they found a taxi on its way home.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“24 Rue de l'Université,” said Bernard.

She lived at number 14, but always stopped her cab some way off. As they crossed the Seine Bernard shivered. Simone was nestled close up to him, very silent. He shut his eyes. The taxi stopped. He helped Simone to get out. It was a grey, melancholy day. Ashbins stood in a line along the pavement. The street was empty.

“When do we meet again?” said Bernard.

She hastily pulled a letter from her bag, held it out to him and ran off. A moment later, a heavy door shut with a bang. Bernard remained for a moment on the pavement, surprised; then, getting back into the cab, said to the driver: “Terminus St. Lazare,” and opened the envelope.

“This, Bernard, is a letter of farewell, a genuine one; you won't see me again. Do not try going to the studio, you won't find anybody there. Don't write to me; I shall not read your letters. I have been too wretched and don't want to be so any more. I do not believe you have understood how greatly I have loved you. Some

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

of the fault is mine; I loathe melodrama and the emphatic, and I took refuge in raillery when I was too unhappy. What is terrible with you, is that one has no hold. Your true life is elsewhere, and I cannot bear it. And yet I love you. I love you for reasons which will greatly surprise you. I love you because your shoulders resemble those of Egyptian statues, because you are unsophisticated and boyish even in your scruples, which seem to me so silly. I love you because you have spoken some very pretty phrases to me about my beauty, which you have certainly forgotten, but which I shall remember all my life. I love you, my dear, because enjoyment suits you. I could love even your coldness, but what exasperates me, what is driving us apart is your wishing to convince yourself and others that this emotional coldness, this devotion to your calling are virtues. They are natural to you, dear, that is all. You love telling yourself that you were born to be an idle philosopher, that you accept all activity like a martyrdom. It isn't true. You love it. You were born for it. You have described your grandfather for

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

me: you will be like him, and before long. You may trust me: I see very clearly where you are concerned. Your renunciation is a form of egotism, only it is a prettier word.

"I was anxious to tell you this, because I like you to be what you are, but you can't run with the hares and hunt with the hounds. After a very long time, if you haven't completely forgotten me (with you, one never knows: it's a possibility), you will perhaps begin to understand that you have spoiled a great love, and that that is always a misfortune. You will marry some little girl in the country. She will be horribly unhappy. Perhaps she will notice it less than others, because she won't know what happiness is like. I shall miss you for a very long time, but a slowly diminishing sorrow is better than the life of doubt, waiting and deception I have lived since I have known you. Good-bye, my dear, dear love; I am glad that I have had the courage for this, I have never loved anyone but you, I love you."

Bernard read this letter three times over, then found himself at the door of his hotel. He went

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

upstairs to his room, stretched himself out on his bed without undressing and cried a little . . . Then he fell asleep. He dreamed he was going through a weaving-room and one of the work-girls came up to him. She showed him a number of *L'Illustration* containing reproductions of pictures. "Do you see, Monsieur Bernard," said she, "this picture I've made of you; they have turned me down because I am only a mill-hand." Bernard looked at the portrait and thought it very good; the face was vigorous and kindly—just as he saw himself. 'Of course,' he thought, 'if it were Françoise or Simone who had painted that picture, everybody would admire it; but because she's a mill-hand, they turn it down . . .' "Don't worry," he said to the woman, "I shall write to the President of the Republic." She returned to her loom full of confidence.

He woke up at eight o'clock. When he left the hotel, it was a fine, cold morning; people were walking quickly, with a cheerful air. Bernard had a yearning to be doing and working and suddenly felt very much alive. 'But how

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

can this be?’ he said to himself, ‘I have a great sorrow, I adore Simone, my life has lost all its meaning.’ Great troops of young girls were coming out of St. Lazare Station; he looked at them with pleasure; some of them were running, clumsy and graceful. He too went off townwards, with a brisk, resolute step. At nine o’clock he was at Monsieur Roch’s.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ANTOINE QUESNAY was president of the Pont-de-l'Eure Discharged and Wounded Soldiers' Club; on that account he was compelled once a month to go out alone after dinner to a meeting. A tradition had established itself that on these evenings Bernard dined with the Antoinettes to keep Françoise company. The latter looked forward impatiently to these evenings, because Bernard always took the opportunity to inform her of new occurrences in his emotional life. Her brother-in-law's *liaison* entertained Françoise; she loved to think of this very Quesnay Quesnay's attention being diverted from his work by a woman; she found, too, in this adventure a happiness rather like that which a novel affords. Sometimes Bernard had nothing to tell her; he would talk about the mill, about music; Antoine

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

would come home about ten o'clock without Simone Beix having been mentioned, and Françoise would go to bed disappointed. But when Bernard had any confidence to make, she guessed it during dinner; for in that event he would remain very silent, take no interest in any subject of conversation, look impatiently at his watch and do what he could to hasten Antoine's departure.

One of these dinners followed almost immediately upon Simone's ultimatum. As soon as they had left the table Bernard proceeded to walk backwards and forwards in the library, picking up a book, turning over the pages in it, then abruptly putting it back on its shelf. Antoine lingered, smoking a cigar and looking at the garden in silent bliss. He wanted to talk and found the two others tongue-tied. At last he got up. "Well," he said, "I must be off, whether or no; I have a good mind to send in my resignation."

"Good-bye," said Bernard promptly.

"*Au revoir*, dear," said Françoise cheerfully.

The door was shut with a bang (all the Ques-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

nays shut doors violently); they heard the engine of the car, the slight grinding of the gear-changes, the friction of the tyres against the gravel of the drive.

“A cigarette for you?” said Françoise.

“Thank you very much . . . Shall we take a turn in the garden, Françoise? It’s a lovely evening.”

They went out; the sun was sinking on the axis of the long rose-walk. The dogs came to meet them, overjoyed; they stooped to stroke them, then went off without a word to the orchard. Françoise turned to Bernard and smiled; a gentle, warm breeze almost imperceptibly lifted her hair. Her face had a happy, questioning expression.

“Well?” said she. “What great news have you to tell me?”

“How do you know that I have great news to tell you?”

“Because you are of all men the least able to hide things of that kind . . . You wanted to drive poor Antoine away the minute you got here . . . Now, what is it? What is afoot?”

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

Are you going to marry her? That would be a jolly good thing."

"Marry whom?"

"Whom? Bernard! . . . Your lady, of course!"

"It's exactly the other way about, Françoise. She has left me . . . Yes, the day before yesterday, when I took her home, she gave me this letter . . . I brought it for you to read."

Françoise took the letter and stopped under an apple-tree. Bernard, standing by her side, tried to follow her impressions on her face. When she came to the phrase, "I love you, my dear, because enjoyment suits you," she sighed. She turned the page, he put his hand on her shoulder in order to read with her. He was surprised by the sensation of pleasure which the warmth of her gave him through the silk and took away his hand quickly enough. Françoise had made no movement to get away. Having finished the letter, she handed it back to him.

"Well," said he, "what do you think of it? Will she come back to me?"

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Françoise had resumed their stroll along the path.

"That's very hard to say . . . I don't think she will . . . She seems very proud and won't want to abase herself . . . Besides, she doesn't love you . . . That letter of hers isn't the letter of a woman in love . . . No, no, she writes too well and she has got the courage to leave you."

"But I think you are wrong," said Bernard. "It is always silly for a man to say of a woman: 'She loves me.' It sounds incredibly fatuous—but, really, I have reasons to believe that this woman did love me. If she didn't, why, for so long past . . . The moment I had an hour to spare, she was at my disposal . . . And then, I can't explain to you . . . No. Only, it is my fault, I have been a beast; I put her after all else in my life, after the mill, after customers . . . God! What a fool I have been at times! One day I tore myself away, and not gently either, from that beautiful creature, to go and have a talk with a master-spinner . . . During the strike I didn't even write to her. I answered her four-page letters with telegrams! If she

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

had not loved me, she would have written me this letter two years ago . . .”

“If she had loved you, she would never have written it . . . Yes, Bernard dear, you must be a horrid lover, with your cold manner, your theories, your systems, your ethics; but a loving woman can put up with much worse . . . Now, if I loved a man . . .”

“‘If I loved,’ Françoise? But you do love a man, I should hope . . . What about Antoine?”

She shook her head impatiently.

“You don’t understand women, Bernard. You will never understand them . . . Yes, of course, I am married, I dearly love my husband, I dearly love my children, I dearly love my home . . . And that will always be Life to me. But, come, do you imagine that I don’t know there’s something else . . . a feeling so strong that family and pride and point of honour are all swept away? You are surprised at hearing me say such things; I know you don’t like it; you are shamefast; you are a Quesnay . . . But that’s hypocrisy . . . After all, you know what desire is for you, for a man? Well, for a woman, dear

boy, it is exactly the same thing, and where that exists, I believe there is nothing to be done; and if your Simone cared about you, you could have humiliated her, neglected her, betrayed her—she would never have written you that letter . . . Never . . .”

To get from the orchard into the kitchen-garden the path narrowed between two hedges, and their bodies found themselves close; against his folded arm Bernard felt the firm contact of a young bosom. He prolonged this contact a moment longer than was necessary. When open ground separated them, he took a deep breath. A long border of white pinks filled the air with strong perfume. The sun had disappeared, and the bats were wheeling in the twilight.

“And you?” said Françoise, bending down over the pinks . . . “Do you miss her?”

“I don’t know . . . I feel I have lost something very beautiful and very precious . . . The moment I am alone I conjure up her form. I tell myself: ‘I shall never see it again,’ and I can hardly believe it . . . I need her, horribly . . . And yet, at the same time, I have as it were a

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

sensation of relief . . . I am free . . . In Paris, when it gets towards five o'clock, I shall now no longer say to myself: 'I shall be late, Simone will be cross' . . . I can do my work quietly, with nothing lurking at the back of my mind . . . If she agreed to start seeing me again, she wouldn't find me changed . . . I should be just as unbearable . . . I should be the same . . ."

"But why, Bernard—since you *know* that it is absurd?"

"Simply because I cannot be otherwise, because a job must be properly done . . . Do you remember that story of Kipling's, *The Man Who Would Be King*? You don't? But you must—the English adventurer, you know, who becomes king of a small Himalayan people and has their respect until such time as he wishes to take to himself a wife . . . Then his subjects become aware that he is a man . . . That's the story . . . Yet a last circumstance: I dared perfectly well say to Simone: 'I shall not come up on Saturday, because my grandfather requires me at Pont-de-l'Eure.' I should never have dared say to Monsieur Achille: 'I shall not be back on

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Monday, because my mistress requires me to lunch with her.' Do you grasp the subtle difference?"

He could hardly see her on the path, but often in passing a rather thicker gooseberry-bush he could not help brushing against her. She stumbled a little, caught herself by his arm and remained clinging to it

"No," she said, "I do not understand . . . You say that a job must be properly done. But why that at Pont-de-l'Eure especially? There's no reason . . . Is it decreed that you are tied to Pont-de-l'Eure for all eternity? . . . You were born there, that is all. It is an accident. . . . If it wasn't you, it would be another . . ."

"That's no argument," said Bernard.

The tour of the garden had brought them back to the narrow passage between the bushes, which, under the vault of the lime-trees, was like a black tunnel. They advanced into it. Bernard, having struck a branch with his forehead, put out his hand, encountered Françoise's body and suddenly felt a mad desire to press her to him. He felt a head fall on his shoulder. He

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

put out his lips at haphazard and met the delicious, humid freshness of other lips. He straightway forgot the world.

"Hoo-oo!" cried a voice in the distance.

It was Antoine's familiar call to Françoise. She slowly disengaged herself and replied without any embarrassment, quite naturally: "Hoo-oo!"

Then she went on more quickly. In the distance they heard Antoine's footsteps on the gravel. He called out:

"Where are you?"

"Here we are," said Françoise. "Come across the lawn."

Bernard marched behind, furious with himself, and thought: 'What has come over us?' So as not to see Antoine again in the light, he said Good-bye out in the dark and refused to go back again into the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



AT Quesnay and Lecourbe's the weavers were only working three days a week. As a good physician rejoices to hear the heart beating, however feebly, Bernard, on his round through the rooms, took delicious pleasure in listening to the sound of the rare surviving looms. Too well aware of the real strength of the mill in its extremity, he thought of the exiguous quantities still to manufacture before the fatal stoppage.

‘Those looms will be able to weave gabardines for another fortnight . . . I still have a hundred pieces of Serbian uniforms over for these women . . . After that, nothing . . . They have no conception by how slender a thread all this hangs. What is to be done? Where is one to go seeking?’

The hands watched him pass with a look of

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

interrogation and trustfulness, like civilians meeting an officer in a town under bombardment. In peace-time they have often judged him harshly; they have looked on his uniform with memories of strikes and barracks. Now, happy in seeing him, they hope he will be able to defend them. This change of attitude, so impressive and far-reaching, gave Bernard great satisfaction.

All his strength was bent towards one little goal, which, in days gone by, he would have considered paltry: to find buyers, to go on working. In France—nothing doing. But in America, in Eastern Europe, in the countries of the “Northern exchanges” perhaps the situation was better. He mentioned it to Monsieur Achille who gave him an indignant stare.

“Natives? Never! Rather shut down!”

In vain did Bernard for several weeks attack his progenitor.

“No, no,” he would reply, “we have never done it.”

“But look here,” Bernard said, “England, the United States are not populated by savages or

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

brigands. They do business in milliards. What are you afraid of? That you won't get your money? There are law-courts over there just as here."

"People we don't know," growled Monsieur Achille.

Adventures frightened him more than death. At last his grandson found the serviceable weapon.

"Monsieur Pascal is working five days a week. He has got very big orders in Holland and Rumania."

"Pascal!" said the old man, pricking up his ears. "So he's working five days a week, is he? He's never said anything about it to me."

The next day, without Bernard having again broached the forbidden subject, the old man himself began timidly:

"After all, Holland is not so very far away . . . You could always go over and have a look."

Before setting out Bernard had to go and say Good-bye to Françoise. He had not seen her

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

again since that kiss in the night. The fact was that he had fled. Twice he had refused to have dinner at her house; at the mill he had seen her from a distance, but, instead of going up to the *crèche* to meet her, as he always used to do, he had escaped to the burlers' room on the fourth floor and had not reappeared on dangerous ground until after a long tour of inspection. He did not know what to say to her. What was she thinking? Was she expecting that haphazard act to mark the beginning of a real love-affair? Was she wishing for more evenings like that, for meetings of greater secrecy, or, on the contrary, had the event taken her, like him, by surprise? 'What has befallen us?' he said to himself over and over again . . . 'Never has any act of mine had so little to do with me . . . I am not even capable of remorse . . . At no moment did I think: "Now I am going to kiss Françoise." All of a sudden I discovered that the kiss had taken place.'

And yet he had been a little guilty. During the whole evening he had wished for and sought those imperceptible, but delicious contacts. But

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

was that a crime? Was that disloyal? Hardly. What would have been disloyal, would have been consciously to carry on what had been begun without either realizing it. The thing to do was completely to forget that moment. It had no connexion with the rest of his life; it could be taken out of it without destroying anything. Unhappily, he discovered so keen a pleasure in calling it into his imagination that he would often dream about it in the midst of his work. All of a sudden, in the middle of a row of looms, between the milling-machines from which yellowish water was running, he would feel the humid freshness of those lips and that body folded in his arms.

What surprised him also was his feeling himself no different in Antoine's presence. He had made no effort to be natural. Antoine, his brother, and Françoise, his sister-in-law, seemed to have no connexion with the personages in that duodecimo adventure. He continued to discuss with Antoine supplies of coal to get in before the rise, the new winter-exhibit, cost-prices, with no uneasy conscience. And *that* was the genuine

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

article, the close-knit union of the common task, of all that long fraternal existence, the alternating lamentations over the folly of Monsieur Lecourbe, the worries of bad trade, the mill. The garden-path in the dark, that amorous young woman—they were dreams whose furtive image would sometimes rise again in the midst of reality and which a smile dispelled.

He feared Françoise. His grandfather's obscure rancour against the Pascal-Bouchet breed hovered, without his being conscious of it, round the idea he had fashioned of her. A foolish, frivolous, unreliable breed. Did she share the Quesnay's firm doctrine of loyalty? Perhaps she was saying to herself: 'We love one another, what does the rest matter? . . . Antoine? . . . I do not love him any more and, besides, Antoine need know nothing about it.' Love . . . Women were always using that word as if it explained something. But what is love? There is desire, which is very strong, but which one can master; then there is affection, friendship, conjugal and brotherly faith. How is social exist-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

ence possible, if you cannot trust your brother or his wife? To be sure, every obligation encounters resistance from the body; but what is a man incapable of entering into obligations, and is there anyone more contemptible?

When he embarked on this current of ideas he detested Françoise.

On the day before his departure for Holland Antoine said to him:

“I suppose you’ll come to say *Au revoir* to Françoise? She wants to see you. Will you come to dine?”

“No, thank you very much; I want to pack this evening, but I’ll try to look in at your place about five o’clock.”

She received him with gentle sadness. While he was talking, awkwardly enough, about his journey, about Holland, about his hopes of bringing back work to do, she looked at him with a melancholy, questioning mien and made no response. At last she said to him:

“I had got a letter waiting for you, Bernard . . . to explain to you . . . Then I tore it up—it’s too difficult.”

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"You did rightly," said he.

Then he talked to her about her children, relentlessly. She seemed unhappy, but made no effort to return to the subject.

CHAPTER THIRTY



ERNARD departed for Holland.

Amsterdam: substantial gabled houses catch reflections of themselves in the smooth waters of the canals. On an immense barge a waterman transports one tiny chest of tea. Massive wooden doors, gleaming with long-continued rubbing, bar the way to age-old "counting-houses."

The Kalverstraat, an opulent hurly-burly, calls to mind oriental bazaars. The smell of spices in a dark shop, a mulatto type glimpsed at the corner of an alley, the photograph of an exotic branch-establishment in a shop-window recall to mind that these burghers were the first to possess the empire of the Indies. The riches of Java have furnished those houses.

The Dutch representative makes excuses in advance for poor business:

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"Lot of stock. The slump is scaring buyers. The Germans are coming back into the market. This is the Nederlandsche Maatschappij . . . a tremendous concern . . . lot of stock. Their buyer, Monsieur Loewekamp, is a friend of mine: I play billiards with him at the *café* every evening. . . Good morning, Mijnheer Loewekamp . . . *De heer* Quesnay from Pont-de-l'Eure . . ."

"*Wij koopen niet*," says Mijnheer Loewekamp, a stout man with shaved head.

Then, in laborious French mingled with English, he makes polite excuses:

"*Situation difficile . . . Plue tard . . . Another time.*"

Bernard smiles amiably; the stout man smiles too. The gleaming door opens again.

His parcel of samples under his arm, the young Frenchman resumes with buoyant steps his progress along the gleaming canals. The Dutchman speaks:

"We love the French in this country. I know Paris myself: the Rue Blanche; do you know the Rue Blanche? . . . On this house there is a tab-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

let in honour of a Frenchman: 'Here lived René Descartes . . .' Who is Descartes? Do you know him? . . . Really! . . . And Monsieur Langlois, the commission-agent in the Rue d'Hauteville, do you know him too? We go in here . . . Export-Maatschappij . . . Very big business . . . But heavy stocks . . . We'll just say Good morning; their buyer, Monsieur Groninghem, is a friend of mine: I play skittles with him. He has got a handsome wife."

"*Wij koopen niet*," says Mijnheer Groninghem, a decent, kindly man with shaved head . . . "Later . . ."

Once more canals, stairs, substantial counting-houses; tramcars boarded at full speed; charming courtyards; *Drapers' Syndics* in the flesh, feeling with expert hands the cloths woven by Norman women; merchants distrustful and good-natured, disdaining indifferent wools.

"Quality in this country . . . Not price . . . And dark, plain designs . . . Here you have got to work for the fashion of the country. The skirts your Paris dealers send us . . . ! Our women's hips split them . . . Big women in

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

this country, very fond of sport . . . Will you come and have a curacao, at Focking's? Everybody goes, bankers and cabmen . . . Afterwards, we'll look up Sijthof . . . Tremendous concern . . .”

From that solid country Bernard carried away promises void of deceit, a little work for the immediate future. The girl Duval can rear her brats by weaving trousers for the gardeners of Haarlem; Daddy Leroy's successor can inspect the white flannels with which fair skaters of Amsterdam will envelop their brawny chests.

Distrustful and uneasy Monsieur Achille saw his cloth depart for so many unfamiliar addresses:

“Loewekamp? Groninghem? Sijthof? Are you sure they are old-established houses?”

For the tenth time Bernard described those sturdy merchants, so like his grandfather. Besides, the cheques came in almost at once. The names of the familiar banks tranquillized Monsieur Achille.

“May I go to England?”

“Good business!”

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

That was his way of wishing him God-speed.

London. The red splashes of the motor-omnibuses, the bluey blacks of the policemen ('all that black cloth—where does it come from?' thinks Bernard) enliven the grey of the City. From the top of a bus he admires the old houses of the Strand. Trails of black and white smoke, transforming the narrow stone houses, turn the city of commerce into a city of dreams. At his side, his "agent," an ex-officer and a gentleman, catalogues, with some erudition, the ancient taverns, the famous signs.

No touching of one's hat when one goes into the shops, more crammed with wares than those of Paris. An old draper, with comic but charming dignity, bends his short side-whiskers and tortoise-shell eye-glasses over the French fabrics.

"Well, sir . . . This will perhaps interest me, not for the home trade, but for Canada and Japan."

Fascinated by the fine wool—as others of his race love fine wood or fine leather—he fondly fingers a soft ratine.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“Very fine, indeed . . . I’m sorry I can’t buy now. Come and lunch at my club, Mister Quesnay.”

Over a table of massive mahogany (“look at that table, Mister Quesnay, it is three hundred years old”) he forces Bernard to drink several glasses of ’56 port. (“Look at the portraits of our chairmen, Mister Quesnay. That one is by Reynolds; this by Sargent.”) By these libations the old gentleman acquits himself, without the peril of buying, of what he thinks he owes to friendship with France.

After lunch, the “captain in the army” takes Bernard for a walk through the big shops, wonderful in their orderliness and profusion, Isles of the Blest. The saleswomen, as pretty as Gaiety Girls, smile at the French accent. The buyers are more encouraging.

“Serge? . . . Gabardine? . . . All right. I dare say we shall be able to buy.”

From the deck of the boat taking him back to France, Bernard, rejoicing, sees Dieppe, the houses of Le Pollet, the towers of the casino, the

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

slender wires of the semaphore rise up out of the mist and focus themselves on the screen provided by the limpid sky. Invigorated by the keen, salt air, he imagines vividly his return to the mill.

"Three hundred pieces! . . . Not so bad for the time being. Monsieur Achille will condescend to give a grunt of satisfaction. Antoine will be delighted . . . And Citizen Renaudin will say that we are doing our utmost to prolong short-time working! Human beings really are pretty comic . . . Another quarter of an hour."

Settling his cap firmly on his head, he pulled the waterproof rug about his knees and tried to go on with his book. It was *The Prince*, which, for some time past, had become a favourite with him.

"Of Cruelty and Clemency, and whether it is better to be Loved or Feared.—Passing to the other qualities above mentioned, I say that every Prince should desire to be accounted merciful and not cruel. Nevertheless, he should be careful not to abuse this quality of mercy. Cesare Borgia was reputed cruel, yet his cruelty . . ."

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

In spite of himself his thoughts returned to his three hundred pieces.

‘Fifty at Selfridge’s . . . a hundred at Scott’s . . . a hundred at Debenham’s . . . fifty at Robinson’s . . . That makes three hundred all right. I’ll have the serges done in the women’s weaving-room and the blue moleskin on the waterside looms . . . Monsieur Cantaert will be able . . .’

In vain did he try to come back to more general ideas.

‘Simone . . . The only beings who can really love are those who give all their lives to love . . . But is that natural? . . . I don’t think it is . . . Fifty at Selfridge’s . . . a hundred at Scott’s . . .’

The boat was gliding along the pier. The tarred timbers were thickly coated with green, smelly moss.

‘Fifty at Selfridge’s . . . a hundred at Scott’s . . .’

Bernard was mumbling his breviary.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“ONSIEUR DESMARES, you can tell the foreman dyer that I am sick of it! . . . Here are ten pieces thrown upon our hands in the United States, because the colour isn't fast . . .”

“It isn't his fault, Monsieur Bernard . . . The dyes nowadays are good for nothing. No one can turn out those pink greys and beiges.”

“I don't care. I am not a dyer. All I can do is to pronounce on the results. Monsieur Leclerc, I have had a Rumanian customer complaining this morning of faults in the weaving of your gabardines. I have told you I won't have more than three faults per piece. If you have weavers who don't know their job, they can go and learn it elsewhere.”

“I know the reason, Monsieur Bernard . . . There's a length of bad yarn . . .”

“I don't care; your business is to examine the

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

yarn when it comes in . . . What I need is good pieces. Besides, henceforward, I'll look for myself. The competition in all foreign markets is terrible. The English and the Germans are everywhere. There is only one high-road to success: that is to turn out good stuff. And then, I must have my pieces prompt. During a slump, customers ask for nothing better than an excuse for cancelling; orders must be delivered to time."

"Have urgent jobs prompt, Monsieur Bernard? It's easy enough to say, but you're not on the job. You stick up a ticket with 'Urgent' on to the piece. In the scouring-room they are put into a machine four at a time, and your ticket has to be taken off . . ."

"It's very easy to stick it on again afterwards."

"It falls into the hands of a chap who doesn't give a damn for it or who can't read. You'd have to be standing over them all day. In the dye-house the chap from whom you want a grey has his vats full of blue or green: do you think he'll hold up everything for one urgent piece?"

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Why, Monsieur Bernard, it would be wrong of him if he did! O no, it is *not* easy.”

He sighed, tired and nervy.

(‘At bottom,’ thought Bernard, ‘he’s right.’) But aloud he said: “I don’t care in the very least, Monsieur Leclerc. I must have my pieces; the rest is your business.”

“He’s getting into his stride,” said Monsieur Leclerc, as he left the office.

“Yes,” said Monsieur Desmares, “what’s bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.”

They too, indulgent during the years of plenty, because they met with the same treatment, were becoming strict about the quality of the work and were amazed to find the hands, who yesterday were still recalcitrant, amenable to their demands.

“It’s a queer thing,” said Monsieur Desmares, “you can ask things of them which, six months ago, would have caused a revolution . . . No one lifts a finger . . . They like it . . . We think we control everything, but it’s work drives us.”

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Bernard saw, to his happiness, the cloud of hostility, which, since his joining the firm, had enveloped his activities and his intentions, disappear into a now almost invisible past.

He experienced an absurd and intoxicating joy in feeling on his young shoulders the weight of this huge machine, by which so many men got their livelihood.

The downfall of Monsieur Vanekem, the fall in the price of wool, the panic on the Bourse had made an enormous breach in the Quesnays' fortunes. But the loss of an artificial wealth, drawing them closer to average humanity, restored to them the sweetness of common sorrows and misfortunes shared. The hands, suddenly deprived of part of their wages and the relative prosperity in which they had been living for some years past, found active consolation in their distress by imagining that of their masters.

"Aye," Huertematte would say to Bernard, "for them as has millions of money and thousands of tons it must mean summat, this bad time must."

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"It's pretty hard," said the master proudly (like a wounded soldier showing his wound), "but it must be harder to bear for you. What are your weekly earnings now? Fifty or sixty francs in place of a hundred and thirty. That's a hole in the family budget!"

"Aye, that it is . . . Them as has seen this coming an 's laid something by, 'll manage, but the others . . . I've a sister-in-law, Monsieur Bernard, a widow, who's got to keep her bairns in bed all day, because she hasn't a shirt to cover them with. I help her as I can, but my missus is expecting her seventh . . . Not the time, you'll maybe say. But you know how 'tis . . . You think you're doing one thing and you are doing another . . . Then, you know, with three days' pay, it don't go very far . . . When all's said and done, the working man has had good times; he has had a taste of things he didn't use to . . . It's always something good to remember . . ."

Both of them, unconsciously relishing the delight of concord regained, forgot in perfect good faith that the next wave of prosperity would

❧ ❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧ ❧

bring dissension with it and enjoyed the sweetness of spontaneously believing in the sentiments which the diminishing wealth of man engenders, in the same way as the ebbing tide liberates the smell of algæ and seaweeds.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



IN the days of the Fools' Paradise Monsieur Achille and Monsieur Pascal had ridiculed at length the senselessness of their former bitter competition. "France is a big country, there's room for everybody." Suddenly and with marvellous facility they had come to agree about all the points on which, for so many years past, they had been divided.

By common accord they had reduced discounts, disallowed credits, refused free samples. They had congratulated one another on the firmness with which in a few months they had managed to put an end to antiquated abuses.

Above all, they had agreed not to contend with one another for certain customers who, in the almost forgotten days before the war, had played off the one of them against the other.

"To what purpose?" said Monsieur Achille.

❧ ❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧ ❧

"Quid prodest?" said Monsieur Pascal.

A convention thus had been entered upon by the two old lords of wool, a convention by which the kingdom of cloth was, by them, divided into inviolable "spheres of influence." In particular, Monsieur Achille was to sell to Roch and Lozeron, while Monsieur Pascal kept Delandre's. They expected great benefits from this understanding.

However, Monsieur Roch, a suspicious and sagacious observer, had soon noticed that, with astonishing persistence, the Pascal-Bouchet prices remained a shade higher than those of Quesnay and Lecourbe. As long as he needed "those gentlemen," he took good care to hold his tongue and bided his time. When it came, that clever strategist repeated against the two allies Napoleon's favourite manœuvre and separated them in order to overcome.

In the spring, the women, in accordance with their sex's custom, had adopted a uniform. It was a tailor-made of plain woven black and white, a material hard to manufacture, a tri-

umph of Monsieur Achille's. Monsieur Roch, who wanted to order a hundred pieces of it, came to Pont-de-l'Eure and found the price too high.

"You know, Monsieur Achille, that I do not haggle with you, but pay good heed to what I say: I can get very fine plain woven at two francs under your price."

"Impossible—unless it be some shoddy without the finish of the Valley."

"I beg your pardon," said Monsieur Roch, with an air of mystery, "it's an article as like yours as two peas and made not so very far from here."

"Pascal Bouchet?" asked Monsieur Achille, raising his eyebrows and stung by a sudden, frightful suspicion.

Monsieur Roch drew his hands apart and gave a discreet smile: it was an ingenious way he had of insinuating falsehood without lying. Monsieur Achille saw red.

"That man's incorrigible," he said bitterly. "His father was a rogue; his grandfather was a rogue. There's nothing to be done with him

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

. . . He's quoting you two francs less, is he?
. . . Well, tell him from me that, whatever his figure may be, mine is ten centimes below it.”

That very evening he wrote to Monsieur Peruel, his Paris representative, to go and show his catalogue of patterns to Delandre, Monsieur Pascal's private customer on Monsieur Pascal's private preserves.

It was the end of that long truce. As soon as Monsieur Pascal learned of what he could rightly consider as a piece of treachery—since he himself was innocent—he immediately saw that his pre-war grievances were not extinct beneath the ashes, but burning with a smoky flame. The sweets of hatred and the love of fighting exhilarated that old campaigner. An obscure story of coatings, a fearful drama of flannels rose up again in his dreams, woke him up in the middle of the night panting with fury and speaking his mind to a spectral Monsieur Achille, who vanished with the dawn. He took train for Paris, hastened to Roch and Lozeron's and offered them a thousand pieces at their own price, no matter what it might be.

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

Soon Françoise had to listen to the alternating complaints and abusive conversation of her father and Monsieur Achille. Each of the two old men arranged it so, that he came to the house when he knew that the other would not be there. If chance brought them together, both beat a retreat.

Passing bravely from one camp to the other, she attempted to restore peace. In vain did she say to Monsieur Pascal:

“I assure you there is a misunderstanding. I have questioned Antoine and his grandfather; they have acted in perfect good faith and believe, indeed, that it is you who broke the undertaking . . .”

“*Arcades ambo*,” said Monsieur Bouchet. “I’ll show ’em the stuff I’m made of.”

In vain she besought Monsieur Achille:

“My father declares it to be your fault that the fight has broken out again . . . He seems sincerely convinced that he is in the right. Cannot you come to an explanation with him? May I invite you both to dinner?”

“No, no,” growled Monsieur Achille, “I don’t

❧ ❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧ ❧

need any of his explanations. I have known your father for forty years: that's enough for me."

After the progenitor's departure Françoise looked for long at her husband with that air of intense seriousness that always frightened Antoine.

"Why didn't you say something?" she asked at last.

"What do you expect me to say? You know grandpapa."

"Yes, but . . . After all, you know the Pasha too, you know perfectly well that he's the most honourable of men alive. He is incapable . . ."

"Of course he is . . . The Pasha's A 1; I still care for him as much as ever . . . Nothing is altered there."

"Why did you not say so?"

He got up, went down on his knees in front of the little low book-case and set about arranging books.

"I can't," said he, with false airiness, "find that book of Siegfried's: *Le Tableau politique de la France de l'Ouest*. Have you . . . ?"

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Antoine," said Françoise passionately, "I can't bear you when you show lack of courage."

He turned round, still crouched on the floor.

"What's the matter, what's the matter?" he said. "You're awful. Why do you want to turn everything into a drama? . . . In what way are these business-affairs of any consequence to you? . . . Don't worry about them . . . We shall see your father over at his place at Fleuré; it comes to the same thing . . . whereas, on the other hand, it is very unpleasant for you to be present when he and grandpapa are quarrelling. Much better keep them apart as far as possible . . ."

"I won't have it," said Françoise. "It seems to me stupid and cowardly—" (she was standing up now, looking like an Amazon brandishing a small javelin and very beautiful: Antoine saw all that)—"yes, cowardly . . . In this dispute some one must be in the wrong; I want to know who; I want the guilty party to make a polite apology, to have it politely accepted, and us to be able to live in peace, without your grand-

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

father, and even Bernard, seeming to look at me as if I were the daughter of a monster.”

Antoine sighed and said nothing; then, having found the book for which he was looking, he sat down in an arm-chair and tried to read. On these hard, rounded characters, on Bernard and Françoise, he felt he had no hold . . . Strange, this theory of Siegfried's about the super-position of the political map upon the physical one, strange but sound. In this way, at Pont-de-l'Eure . . . He circumspectly lifted his pupils to see what Françoise was doing. He was thinking of the lighthouse of La Havre, which he had seen appearing and disappearing that night at Deauville on the sands, under the stars. How sweet he had found that heroic self-abasement!

‘She isn't really reading, she's too upset . . . I must say something to her . . . How shall I begin?’

He realized very well that the longer the silence was prolonged, the greater would be the importance which the quarrel assumed. But she did not raise her eyes; he found no “opening,” and they went to bed without having discovered

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

any way of exchanging a word, although both wished to do so. Next morning Françoise was agreeable, even cheerful, and made no allusion to the evening's discussion. But after Antoine had gone out, she telephoned to Bernard to come to lunch.

The wind was bowing the black skeletons of the rose-trees under the driving rain. Underfoot, the sycamore and lime-leaves, rotting already, formed as it were a carpet of gold felt. Pulling his waterproof cape about him and leaning forward to protect his streaming face, Bernard slowly threaded the long drive.

After lunch, his sister-in-law came and seated herself by his side on the sofa, while Antoine slowly lighted his pipe.

"There is a matter, Bernard, I wished to talk to you about. It is this stupid misunderstanding between my father and the lot of you. I do not know who is in the wrong and who in the right, but it seems to me all very childish . . . And you can understand how awkward and even painful it is for me."

❧❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧❧

"Poor Françoise," said Bernard with a smile, "Trojan captive in the midst of Greeks! You are charming, daughter of Priam, but your father has provoked us. He'll have his work cut out for him . . . No, seriously, Françoise, all this alters nothing in our affection for you, but business must be kept out of the sphere of the affections . . . in the interest of the affections themselves."

His tone strove to be that of agreeable banter, but she knew the spirit of the Quesnays sufficiently to understand that she was wasting her time.

Tired of the complaints of the hostile captains, she went and sat down at the piano. A fantastic, broken, melancholy air expressed her ironic sadness.

Stretched out in an arm-chair, Antoine was turning over the pages of a catalogue of machine-tools: Bernard, standing near the window, looked in a vague reverie at the meadows bordered with black apple-trees which gently sloped down towards Pont-de-l'Eure.

Suddenly, from the high top of the smoke-

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

stack a thin jet of white steam rose towards the clouds; the drawn-out whistles of the mill drowned the music of the piano. Bernard stepped forward, tapped his brother on the shoulder and, without realizing what he was doing, with a swift turn of the wrist started up an invisible machine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Françoise spoke no further about Monsieur Achille's inflexibility or Bernard's coldness; she preserved a polite and unvarying melancholy. But Antoine knew that behind that curtain of good manners hostile shapes were moving in silence. At Christmas he proposed that he should take her to Paris for a few days. She accepted joyfully.

"So your sister is coming to Paris?" said Jean Philippe Montel to Hélène de Thianges . . . "If you do not invite me to dinner, I shall never speak to you again."

Hélène laughed and promised . . . But to avoid a painful evening with Antoine Quesnay she took a box at the Opéra-Comique, where *Pelléas* was being done. They arrived late, all in a fairly bad temper. Françoise was vexed with Hélène for letting a tactless invitation re-

vive her forgotten memory of a quarrel; Montel's presence gave her no pleasure. Antoine, believing the opposite, was wretched. Thianges did not like that kind of music. Hélène alone was placid and cheerful. She had no violent passions and looked on life as a show.

The whispering necessary for arranging the seats got on Antoine's nerves.

"Take the chair next to Françoise," murmured his sister-in-law, "I have seen this seventeen times."

"O no," said Antoine and Françoise together, each of them slightly vexed at the "O no" of the other. At last Antoine took the chair, because the audience in front was turning round angrily.

The music was a very sweet threnody, underlining the melancholy of the words. "*I am not happy here,*" sang Mélisande. In the half-light of the stage her profile, framed by her fine hair, strongly recalled Françoise. "*I had rather let you know to-day, lord, that I am not happy here.*" Antoine had preserved the extreme naïveté of men who rarely go to the theatre: he

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

did not know the name of the actress, or even the subject of *Pelléas*. A fair-haired woman was singing, with a childlike, despairing unhappiness: "*I am not happy*," and he reflected that he too was keeping prisoner in a hostile house a more beautiful and sadder Mélisande.

What ought he to do? What ought Golaud to have done? The music created a simple, clear world, in which the major virtues seemed easy. Above all, one must be pitiful and loving. "*Ah, come, be reasonable, Mélisande. Is it me you wish to leave?*" Antoine sighed. Françoise looked at him furtively. "*O no, it is not that. I would like to go away with you. It is here I can no longer live.*" Why had he not thought of that? To leave Pont-de-l'Eure . . . Then perhaps he might find her again. But what a decision to take!

The curtain fell. The noise of the applause built up a hard, closed world again. Standing at the back of the box, Thianges was looking for familiar faces. "Look, Françoise—over there in the stage-box—Madame Debussy . . . And there, that man standing up by the orchestra

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

talking to Marthe de Fels, that's Léger, Briand's cabinet-secretary."

"It is curious," said Jean Philippe, "that in one way this dates very little, and, more particularly, that in spite of appearances it has inspired nothing. There have been no disciples."

"But how can you say such a thing?" said Françoise, who was bent on contradicting him. "All modern music derives from this. I was trying to play *Petrushka* on the piano yesterday; I kept finding harmonies all the time that are Debussy and nothing else."

"Certainly," said Montel, "but I do not believe in the least that a Russian had any need to borrow them from Debussy. The fact of the matter is that this music and Russian music have a common Oriental source."

An old gentleman came into the box and kissed Hélène's hand.

"Well," said he, "would you have believed that it would date like that? When I think that twenty years ago I would have done battle in defence of Debussy . . ."

Antoine listened to them, bored. He himself

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

still heard repeated the sad, slow phrase: “*I am not happy here*” . . . What ought he to do, to save Mélisande? Françoise’s bare, polished shoulders gleamed softly; she was wearing a plain white frock, a young girl’s frock without a colour or a jewel. She alone was capable of such wise audacities and of attracting glances by modest means. The lights were dimmed again. Antoine allowed himself to be carried away by the current of the music.

Françoise too was dreaming on her own account. The scene at the window made her think of Bernard. What a queer boy—perhaps he was right in shunning her. “*I love you, my dear, because enjoyment suits you.*” What precisely had that woman meant by that? She could still feel Bernard’s hands on her bosom. How wondrous that minute had been to her! All that evening she had felt such desire to be pressed between strong arms. Antoine was so weak; she was sorry for him; she would not have wished to hurt him; but she would have liked him different.

It was the scene between Golaud and the

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

child. "*My uncle Pelléas . . .*" "*Do they kiss sometimes?*" "*Do they kiss? No, father dear . . . O yes, yes, once . . .*" O yes, yes once . . . And there would be no second time. She imagined Bernard alone with her in her room, closed her eyes and listened.

Mélisande is at the point of death. So frail in that great bed, so infantile . . . How guilty Antoine feels! Since to this we all must come, why destroy those whom we love? What is important in life, if not to bring happiness into a pretty face? The smell of waves in the night . . . The lighthouse revolving and its thin beam of light . . . Self-abasement, sacrifice of egoism, sacrifice of everything to the joy of perfectly understanding one being. "*I have done you so much hurt, Mélisande, I cannot tell the hurt that I have done you.*" I have done you so much hurt, Françoise . . . An obscure hurt, difficult to define . . . A hurt of omission, inflicted by neglect . . . but I have done you so much hurt. "*Do not stay here, Golaud; it must have silence now.*" "*Ah come, man, come, 'tis terrible, but 'tis not your fault. She was a poor*

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

mysterious little being, like all of us." Like all of us . . . No necessity for trying to understand, no necessity for arguing. What for? In an argument Françoise was in the wrong, Monsieur Achille and Bernard in the right. No necessity, however, for arguing. The one thing needful was love. Looking at those closed eyes between their fair tresses in the great bed, Antoine swore to himself to take Françoise away from the tyranny of the mill. From the violins purled the sound of harps. Old Arkel lifted up the dead woman's child.

The lights, going up for the last time, revealed to Françoise Antoine's eyes glittering with tears, which he wiped away vigorously. She knew very well why he was crying.

"Now, that child," said Thianges, standing up. "Was it Golaud's or Pelléas's?"

"Are you staying in Paris for long?" said Montel to Françoise, as he helped her on with her cloak. "Shall we be seeing you again?"

"No," she said, curtly enough. "My husband is leaving to-morrow, and I do not want to let him go back home by himself."

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

The Thianges' gave Montel a lift in their car, as he lived in their neighbourhood; the Antoinés took a taxi. They were both very silent. In the dark Françoise gently passed her fingers over Antoine's eyes to see if he was still crying. She wiped away an invisible tear, then put her hand against her husband's lips.

“Poor Golaud!” said she, while Antoine eagerly kissed her hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*"They came, the brothers, and took two chairs
In their usual, quiet way;
And for a time we did not think
They had much to say."*

THOMAS HARDY



WHEN they had finished with the letters, Antoine said to Bernard:

"I should like a word with you. Will you come to my office?"

A private conversation between the two brothers was so rare that, as he walked silently by his brother's side, Bernard thought: 'There's something amiss . . . What can it be? . . . Antoine looks very tragic this morning; Françoise has been so queer this last fortnight. At bottom, Antoine has made a bad marriage. A great man of affairs ought perhaps not to be married at all. He would have to be jealous of himself. The greatest, all the same . . . It all

❧❧ Bernard Quesnay ❧❧

depends on the woman; she must be passive, or collaborate. Françoise is antagonistic.'

In Antoine's office there was a large photograph of his wife, and her influence was noticeable in countless details. Of all the Quesnay offices his was the only one to have a carpet; the furniture was antique, and the old engravings on the walls illustrated the processes of the woollen industry in the eighteenth century. In them you saw girls weaving in panniered gowns and delightful children in round vests working hand-presses.

Bernard took an arm-chair, played mechanically with a ruler and, as his brother would not begin, said in a somewhat gruff tone:

"Well?"

"Well," said Antoine, without looking at him, "I simply want to ask you one question: Would it vex you a great deal if I left the firm?"

"You?" said Bernard, with genuine stupefaction. "Why, what an idea! Are you cracked?"

"No; yesterday evening I had a talk with Françoise, which lasted the greater part of the

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

night . . . The poor girl is at the end of her tether. She has always found our mode of life very gloomy and grandpapa's tyranny very oppressive. She has borne it a long while and made effort after effort. And now, the row with her father puts her in an impossible position . . . Don't shrug your shoulders, Bernard, I beg of you; we must have a little imagination. The great fault of us Quesnays is our incapacity to perceive what is real to other people. A woman has not, like you, constant activity to prevent her thinking about herself. Incidents which seem very minute to you assume enormous importance in her eyes. She is made wretched by innumerable little rubs which you would not even feel. You say: 'No.' But it is not a debating-point, it is a question of fact . . . In any case, as far as I am concerned, I do not want my wife to be unhappy. Neither do I want to put you in an awkward fix. I will stay on as long as necessary, but I want it to be understood as a general proposition that I leave the firm as soon as it can conveniently be done."

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

"This all seems to me highly exaggerated," said Bernard, twiddling the ruler he had in his hand. "You are taking a serious, final decision because of an accidental state of affairs. If it is our quarrel with her father which is worrying your wife so, I will gladly shake hands with Monsieur Pascal and wipe that whole business off the slate."

('The conversation must not be allowed to take that turn,' thought Antoine. 'Everything seems capable of arrangement by words, but far-reaching difficulties will crop up again at the first occasion . . . My choice is made . . . Françoise . . .')

"No," he said aloud to his brother, "it is not only that; there is incompatibility of temper between Françoise and the house of Quesnay. There must be a divorce. You may also put upon the last pleadings that I, as I have become during the last six months, am no longer minded to be the sort of man required here. I do my work without any satisfaction to myself, and badly, I know; I have lost faith."

"Yes," said Bernard, "you certainly have

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

greatly changed. All the same, you know the technical side of the manufacture through and through and were still being of great use. Who is to take your place?"

"You'll soon be having young Roger Le-courbe."

Bernard pulled a face.

"A first-class Honours man!"

"He will do better than I. Day by day, I give you my word, I feel myself less suited to this job. It doesn't interest me any more; I am sick of it; I can't do anything about it either."

"And what do you mean to do? You know that, away from the mill, you won't be well off . . . With the fall in the franc, the funds you hold aren't worth very much, and, moreover . . ."

"O, we've thought of all that; we've made our plans. We mean to buy a house in Provence and spend the greater part of the year there. . . . I personally like being warm and, as long as I have a car and a gun, I am happy . . . Françoise will have the children, a garden, flowers; I'll keep a tiny *pied-à-terre* in Paris, so that

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

Françoise can hear a little music in winter and see her friends . . .”

“You’ll be horribly bored.”

“I do not think so . . . It is you, Bernard, who are always bored. And it’s that which makes you so active and successful . . . But I, you know, am easy to amuse; perhaps I shall write a *Life of Tocqueville* . . . And then, I tell you again, my wife is everything to me . . . That, however, you will never be able to understand.”

“Never!” said Bernard, almost ill-naturedly.

He went to the window and looked at the lories in the long yard, the workmen laden with pieces, all the familiar and, for him, so intelligible activity of the mill. A mechanic in a blue jacket was carrying some castings, which Bernard knew were destined for a new hydraulic press. A fuller passed, carrying on his shoulder a nasturtium-coloured remnant and a bright blue remnant, which made a bright contrast. Further on, Monsieur Desmares and Monsieur Can-taert seemed engaged in a furious argument, and Bernard knew why. Over the orange roofs of

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

the factory, on the hill, you could see Pont-de-l'Eure cemetery in the middle of the bare trees.

(‘How can Antoine be so blind as not to see that this activity is the life of a Quesnay? I cannot even conceive the possibility of myself turning my back on all that. There is nothing more beautiful, more obvious, more necessary in the world. Terrible, a man who is tied to the apron-strings! Antoine is done for.’) “What shall I answer?” he said aloud. “I cannot keep you here against your will. I disapprove of your scheme, and not merely from the narrow point of view of the mill; no, I believe that what you are doing is a very serious thing: if the middle-class is bent on seeking enjoyment before all, it is lost as a class. Besides, I believe that you will regret it. Having said my say—do what you wish. I feel equal to steering the bark all by myself.”

“That is all I wanted to know,” said Antoine coldly. “It will be the very devil talking about it to grandpapa.”

“I’ll prepare him,” said Bernard.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Then, dropping the ruler and suddenly more animated:

“Tell me, by the way: what have you done for the looms by the water-side? You were talking of having them driven by separate motors. Would it be a saving?”

Antoine mustered up a little zeal again to talk of gearing and transmissions. In front of him, Françoise's portrait, that charming, melancholy face, denied the seriousness of these problems.

‘But what is serious?’ he was thinking, as he estimated transmission losses.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

*"Hamlet est un mauvais prince, parce
qu'il médite sur un crâne."*

ALAIN

“OOD evening,” said Delamain. “Good evening, O wise man, who knowest how to keep thyself rare and precious. Fools think it necessary to see one another once a week. But really one changes very little.”

He drew Bernard towards the light and bestowed a long look upon him.

“You are altered, all the same. Turn round. How amusing! You are getting the ‘captain of industry’ look.”

“By what can you tell that?”

“Ah, my dear Quesnay, one would need to be a Balzac . . . Something precise and authoritative . . . the soft collar, the well-tailored

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

coat, the strong boots . . . And, above all, that sad, relentless, gentle expression of Vigny's soldiers . . . What have you been doing with yourself? The last time I saw you here, you reported that you were overwhelmed by business.”

“Yes,” said Bernard joyously. “I was seeking . . . I was seeking something intangible in a direction where there is nothing to be found. I wanted to be ‘just.’ That isn't possible. It doesn't even mean anything. You can be loyal to your calling, to your associates; you can keep your word, that is something good to begin with, but it's all . . . I understand the game now, Delamain, and the professionals are kind enough to tell me that I am an honourable partner . . . The strange thing is that that does not prevent my remaining, at bottom, the timid and undecided young man you used to know, a great reader and a great simpleton . . . But—the moment it is a question of woollens, a Quesnay ancestor inside me takes command and knows what is to be done, without hesitation . . . I am the pilot's son, I know the channels . . .”

Delamain wagged his head.

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"I recognized the existence of that Quesnay ancestor a long while ago," said he.

They smoked for a time in silence.

"One thing, however, you must understand," Delamain said at last, "namely, that your solution is valid only for yourself. You used to torment yourself with certain scruples—you have allayed them with certain sophistries. You have sacrificed part of your mind to the unity of your Ego. That is absolutely as it should be. It is certain that, in order to live, we each of us need to construct a system which allows for our existence . . . That is absolutely as it should be, on condition that you do not forget that at the same time a Ramsay Macdonald, a Romain Rolland are, in their turn, constructing diametrically opposite systems, which to them seem every whit as stable, every whit as noble."

"As noble, maybe," said Bernard, "but not as stable."

"O yes, they are," said Delamain. "You have sketched out for yourself a certain ideal type of middle-class, at once military and industrial, and

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

you are trying to turn yourself into a living exemplification. You are justified. But someone else has sketched out for himself a type of ideal revolutionary, and he is justified, just as you are . . . However, I am doing wrong in telling you this."

"Why?" said Bernard. (And at that moment the image of Simone passed through his mind: 'She too used to think that I lived for a system which is not necessarily true. But Delamain, like Simone, is fundamentally ignorant of real life; which admits of but one truth.') He continued: "However, the beauty does not lie in the doctrine; it lies in a certain attitude . . . Your beloved Stendhal clearly recognized that . . . Look here: I must at some time have spoken to you with horror of the cold greed of business men. Well, my friend, man is a more complex animal than I used to believe. . . . I have told you of the hoary vendetta between the families of Quesnay and Pascal Bouchet? . . . Since the great crisis it has broken out with greater violence . . . Monsieur Pascal declared the War of Velour Cloth against us, a war, I assure you, that

would deserve as much renown as the Wars of the Roses or the Hundred Years War. . . . Do you know what Velour Cloth is?"

"I think I do," said Delamain, " . . . it is a grey or drab stuff that women make cloaks of . . . Denise has one."

"The colour is immaterial," said Bernard with the slight irritation of the expert in the presence of a layman. "It is a fabric whose face is combed into a nap which is then sheared, and it's the great post-war success. The lower middle-class has no money, the cost of living is high, the women cover up the shabbiness of their dresses with these light cloaks trimmed with artificial fur. The French textile industry is turning out nothing else, and the competition is terrible; but for a long time we Quesnays shared with Monsieur Pascal Bouchet a monopoly of the finest velours. The finish of the Valley is celebrated: we were able to make a living . . . Only—it happened in consequence of family-quarrels, which had already resulted in my brother's leaving the mill . . ."

"Your brother Antoine?" said Delamain.
"Has he left you?"

"Yes, didn't you know? He has bought a house in the South, where he has been living for some months now. O, I can get on without him; he wasn't much use . . . Well, Monsieur Pascal, feeling himself free from all obligations towards us after his son-in-law's departure, began hostilities by offering the Louvre a superb velour at a quite ridiculous figure. 'Very well,' said my grandfather, 'if Pascal wants to play that game, he will find me the winner in the end. I've more staying-power than he.' So we counter-attacked the next morning and won the battle of the Galeries Lafayette in brilliant fashion. Then the campaign continued with varying fortunes, at the Printemps and the Samaritaine. The battle of the Bon Marché remained undecided, each side claiming the victory. At the beginning both sides would have liked to delimit the area of hostilities, but that is impossible. Prices quickly got about. A tariff was set up. We got to the pitch of selling everything under cost-price. When the December stocktaking came round,

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

Monsieur Pascal Bouchet had lost several millions. We, of course, had lost as much, but he was harder hit, as he had no reserves. Before the commencement of hostilities, he was badly weakened by the collapse of a Mr. Vanekem, by the break in the Rumanian exchange and by enormous expenses incurred in restoring his *château* at Fleuré, which belonged to Agnès Sorel . . . You should have heard my grandfather's exposition of all this and talking of Agnès Sorel, with a perfectly inimitable movement of the shoulders! In spite of everything, Monsieur Pascal flourished and was confident of the future. A local bank was backing him; one good season could put him right again.

“Unhappily the banker himself had the most pressing need of money and was obliged to demand the immediate repayment of an advance. Monsieur Pascal asked for time; the other could grant none . . . In the end, a few days ago, it looked as if the Pascal-Bouchet concern was doomed to suspend payment at the end of the month. A tragic enough conclusion, beneath its

apparent commonplaces, when you consider that Monsieur Pascal is sixty-eight years old, that he has worked all his life, that he has rightly been looked upon as the most honourable of men, in short, that it was a sad and undeserved end for his career. For my grandfather, on the other hand, it was the fulfilment of all his prophecies, the downfall of the hereditary enemy, the grand victory.

“But in his extreme peril Monsieur Pascal did the last thing one would have foretold. He asked for a conference with my grandfather, to whom he had not spoken for many months, explained the situation to him and told him that he relied upon his support.”

“Napoleon on board the *Bellerophon*,” interrupted Delamain. “‘I come, like Themistocles, to seat myself at the hearth of the most powerful, the most steadfast and the most generous of my foes.’”

“Exactly . . . But my grandfather behaved much better than the English. In the first place, he betrayed no exultation, he did not even say—what would have been legitimate—‘I always pre-

dicted it!’ He remained silent all the evening and even somewhat gloomy. The next morning he went over to Louviers and was closeted with Monsieur Pascal. When he returned, he said to us: ‘I have seen the last balance-sheet. It is quite possible to save the business. They need four million; we can manage that.’ And he has put on his legs again this competitor whose annihilation he has been prosecuting for forty years . . . What do you think of that?”

Delamain looked at his friend with amused attention.

“I think,” said he, “that you are thorough representatives of the military tradition . . . People fight for four years, thirty years, a hundred years; then the whole world is ruined, and the victor lends the vanquished all he has . . . At bottom, you know, the great mistake which the old economists from Ricardo and Bentham to Marx made was in believing that people go in for business in order to make money. The aim of people like your grandfather is not to become rich, but to become so while fighting a

rival. If the rival disappears, the game is over . . . As that Englishman . . . Russell, I think . . . says: 'If two football teams came to an understanding, they could score many more goals, only there would be no more football.' "

"You understand perfectly," said Bernard. "But it's a pretty melancholy game."

"All games are melancholy," said Delamain. "Really light-hearted people do not play games."

"Don't make paradoxes," said Bernard. "I have been working all day, I am tired."

He looked at his watch. He was dining with Liliane Fontaine. She had begged him to be punctual, as she made her first entry at nine o'clock.

Delamain's stairs were narrow and badly lit . . . This dinner? . . . She would talk about her career . . . Yes, and it was undeniable too that she was becoming a celebrity. "In my generation," Liliane Fontaine would say, "there are only Falconetti, Gaby Morlay, Blanche Montel and myself . . . There is room for everybody." She would say also: "It's a pity the Comédie Française pays so badly, because I

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

should like to play *Phédre* . . .” She did not really love Bernard. She thought only of her career. It was the same with him. She had a delicious body. That was absolutely as it should be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



URING the four following years the management of the firm of Quesnay and Lecourbe was the scene of slow and far-reaching changes. Monsieur Achille was growing old; his memory was not so good as it used to be; every now and then a day would come on which his mouth was slightly twisted, and he then had difficulty in speaking. At the same time he was becoming irritable and used to criticize the decisions Bernard had made, without, however, being capable of suggesting others. People got into the way of hiding disagreeable events from him. Power was ebbing away from him. That distressed him. "Why do you shut up when I come into the room?" he would say.

Bernard seemed to live for nothing but the mill now, and did so with a sombre and taciturn ardour. Once a week he went to Paris to see

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

his customers. Perhaps he devoted an evening to his pleasures. People said that he was thinking of marrying. Françoise, who returned every summer to spend some weeks at Fleuré with her children, held that her brother-in-law was gloomy and embittered, that he had sacrificed the only woman he would ever love and that he lamented the loss of her from the bottom of his heart. Antoine did not think so at all. "You don't know him," he used to say, "women play no part in his life."

At Pont-de-l'Eure Bernard was in his office every morning at eight o'clock; an hour's fencing in the evening was his sole recreation; he went to bed early. When he thought of himself, it was always as a young man, but at the same time others decided that he was ageing and assuming a great air of authority. The clerks knew that Monsieur Bernard's orders alone were important. They had always considered Monsieur Lecourbe's as eloquent soliloquies. They recognized clearly that Monsieur Achille's were no longer, as aforetime, the last word.

A son of Monsieur Lecourbe's had "come into

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

the business" in October, 1921. His cousin had at first judged him with unjust and summary severity. First, because he was a Lecourbe, then, because he had taken his degree (in moral sciences and law), and, chiefly, because on his first day he had criticized the methods of the firm and announced intentions of reforming them.

"You are making no profits at all," he had said, turning over the balance-sheets. "Your money would bring you in as much, if you simply had it 'carried forward' every six months . . . And in gold francs (which is the only real way of accounting) you are getting poorer every year."

Bernard had begged him to put on a blue over-all and had sent him to the wool-sorters. He spent several days among them, sitting on a high chair in front of a greasy tray piled with fleeces and facing a sly old sorter, whose diagnosis Monsieur Achille came from time to time to inquire.

"He does his best, Monsieur Achille," the old man would say, "he does his best, but he bain't

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

very bright. This very morning he left notches in a first quality.”

But Roger Lecourbe was a type of young man very different from those which Antoine and Bernard's generation had produced. He talked Political Economy, like his father, but was always well informed. He drove his Bugatti to admiration and did bends faultlessly at seventy-five miles an hour. He could do five foot six at the high jump, twenty foot nine at the long jump and the hundred yards in ten and two-fifths. He got it into his head to be champion wool-sorter and became it in a fortnight. Old Ursin, his preceptor, marvelled: “He's better than me, M'sieur Bernard, 't ain't to be believed.”

Then Bernard, who wanted nothing better than a disciple, adopted his cousin and straightway entrusted him with little missions of an educative nature:

“Roger, these borders are twisted; have Monsieur Desmares on the carpet and tell him this must stop.”

“I don't mind,” young Lecourbe would say,

“ “ Bernard Quesnay “ “

“but I know what the upshot will be. He will take his magnifying glass in his right hand, raise his left to heaven and affirm that this cannot be due to the weaving. And, no doubt, he will be right.”

“That, indeed, is likely. Then you will send for Monsieur Leclerc and tell him that it is the fault of the dressing.”

“Another song-and-dance. He will retort: ‘Monsieur Roger, if you can explain to me how the dressing can produce such a result, I shall be most interested to hear you . . .’ And I shall be most embarrassed.”

Bernard laughed outright.

“Yes,” said he, “the only thing is that when you have unjustly blamed the whole mill, twisted borders will disappear. You must make a fuss.”

“You are terrible, Bernard,” said Roger Le-courbe. “Monsieur Achille and you, at heart, are Spartiates: that is to say, first-class fighters and quite unbearable.”

“Come, come,” mumbled Bernard gruffly, but well enough pleased.

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

He got into the way of having this young man about him, faithfully following him on all his rounds. Sometimes he would ask himself: 'What does Roger make of me? Am I for him what my grandfather was for me, that is to say a useful, efficient creature, rather ridiculous, however, rather one-idea'd? Very likely. And yet it seems to me only yesterday that I came back from the war.'

When he saw himself in a mirror, he saw Bernard Quesnay the schoolboy and, later, the soldier, whom he had always known. What did the others see? A sad memory cut through him then like a sharp pain. "Do you love yourself?" That was what his dear Simone used to say when she caught him in front of a looking-glass. "O, not in the least," he used to answer, "but I am so surprised at myself."

That remained true.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



MAN-SERVANT came to the office to say that Monsieur Achille was ill and keeping to his room. At lunch-time Bernard went to get news. He met the doctor on the stairs.

"Anything serious?" he asked.

"Serious?" said Dr. Guérin. "It isn't very serious this time, but it is a serious warning. He mustn't do any more work."

Monsieur Achille had had a slight seizure. He was lying on a sofa, his face a trifle too red and wearing that air of gravity which the approach of death and the exertions of the struggle impart. He was breathing rapidly and raised restless, glassy eyes to intruders.

Bernard contemplated the bedroom, in which he had never been since his childhood. His grandmother's bed was still there. The furniture was covered with garnet-red plush. Large

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

buttons punctuated the upholstery of the easy-chairs. There were daguerreotypes on the walls, on the chimney-piece a bronze presented by the hands to Monsieur Achille on his wedding-day. This bronze represented a naked man driving a plough. There were also shells and painted pebbles, souvenirs of Dieppe and Etretat.

"Good afternoon, grandpapa," said Bernard.

"Good afternoon," said a curiously feeble voice. "Any news?"

"Nothing much. Everything is going all right. A nice order from Brazil has come in this morning."

"The pound?"

"Over one hundred francs."

"Wool?"

"Dear."

At that moment Monsieur Lecourbe and his son came in on tiptoe.

"Any news?" the old man asked wearily.

"Nothing," said Roger. "Prices go up and up. I was shown some two-seventy at eighty francs this morning. But I have got to have it all the same."

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"For gabardines?" said Monsieur Achille.

And he almost smiled, happy at being able to remember.

Then all fell silent. Sitting round the head of the family, they sought in vain for a subject to take him out of his suffering. 'Morocco?' thought Bernard. 'No, it means nothing to him . . . The miners' strike in England? No . . . Now, what did I go and see in Paris yesterday? Shaw's *Saint Joan*? He'd respond finely to that! . . . Queer, perhaps he is dying, and yet it seems inconceivable to talk to him tenderly or even naturally . . . I think he cared for me. Poor old chap! . . .'

A rapid review of ideas suddenly provided him with a subject of certain interest to the invalid.

"Monsieur Pascal's fuller has told one of our men that their new season's coatings are a failure."

"Ah ha!" said Monsieur Achille, with a feeble smile of his twisted mouth. "He never understood fulling, Pascal didn't, never!"

"The burlers are asking for a rise," said Monsieur Lecourbe.

♥ ♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥ ♥

"And they're in the right," murmured Roger Lecourbe.

Bernard gave him a look of displeasure.

"They're in the right!" said he. "That's easy enough to say."

At that instant, the sound of his own voice reminded him that his grandfather had answered him with the same phrase, the very same, six years ago, and he blushed. Monsieur Achille had shut his eyes. All went out on tiptoe.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



MONSIEUR ACHILLE had his third seizure, of which he died, in December. Antoine and his wife came over from Saint Tropez for the funeral. They stayed at Fleuré, but came to lunch with Bernard, who found his brother altered. A '*Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* side,' thought Bernard. Françoise was pregnant and seemed happy, more placid than she used to be. Her face showed a tendency to fill out, but she was still very beautiful.

She felt herself a complete stranger in Pont-de-l'Eure, and things assumed for her a novel character she had never discerned in them.

"O, how old Bernard has got!" she said under her breath to Antoine, while Bernard was at the telephone.

"He has just been through some very heavy days."

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

"Yes, but his hair is grey and he is wrinkled: two strongly marked lines between nose and mouth. You look much younger."

"I see what you are driving at," he said and smiled at her tenderly.

Bernard, standing receiver in hand, saw that smile from afar, and it annoyed him.

'That life in the south . . .' he thought. 'Waking up, very late, under the mosquito-curtains . . . The papers . . . Breakfast in the sun on the balcony, Antoine in pyjamas, Françoise in a kimono . . . The children on the beach . . . Siesta, with a novel . . . Tea, English and Russian friends from Cannes . . . toast, a slice of cake . . . Happiness to turn your stomach.'

When he joined them again, Antoine asked him for news of the mill.

"Are you busy? And wool? Dear, I suppose. All that must be very difficult."

"Wool?" said Bernard. "It rises and falls—we are beginning to get used to it; we have given up speculating; we buy from day to day; one day we make a mistake, another we do well;

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

that's not of great importance. No, the serious factors are the exchange and, above all, taxation . . . All that is so obscure and unsystematic . . ."

"And the hands? No more strikes?"

"No; we have a system now of automatic increases in wages as the index-figure for the cost of living rises. It's all perfectly above-board. At bottom, the hands are decent folk. When you play the game with them, they appreciate it. That is all much simpler than we used to think . . . My chief concern is our new undertakings."

"Yes, I know," said Antoine, "your wool-business at Roubaix and your spinning-mill in the United States . . . You must have an appalling lot to do."

"O no; Roger is a great help . . . He has turned out first-rate . . . And then I like work. What are you to make of life, if you don't work? You think of yourself, indulge in self-analysis, are a torment to yourself. It is splendid to come home at night, dead-tired, go to bed at nine and sleep like a log."

• • Bernard Quesnay • •

Françoise, who was listening to this conversation, said with some asperity:

"But isn't that the philosophy of an unhappy man, Bernard?"

"Not at all," retorted Bernard defiantly.

The sight of her still gave him pleasure, but there was now, as it were, a latent hostility between them. She felt it, and when she found herself alone with him for a minute, she looked at him with much coquetry:

"It's funny, Bernard, to see you turned into a big man of business. Everybody says you are one."

"Don't you believe them. It's all a game."

She had the fugitive impression that he was lifting a mask and was about to show her a truer face; but at that moment Roger Lecourbe came in, escorting his sister.

The Lecourbes had summoned Yvonne from England for the funeral. Bernard had not seen her for a long time. At first sight, people found her massive, all the more so as she dressed with almost monkish inelegance. She had fine, rather short-sighted eyes and a pretty voice. She was

“ Bernard Quesnay “

serious and precise, but not at all pedantic. A trait of hers which greatly pleased Bernard was her never affecting grief that she did not feel. She obeyed all the proprieties, but stopped talking almost at once about the death of this old man, whom she had hardly known, in order to explain labour conditions in England to Bernard and her brother.

“I think,” said Bernard, “that their great mistake has been their determination at all costs to maintain the gold value of the pound. As the result, their wages are almost twice as high as ours and they cannot export.”

“That is perfectly correct,” said Yvonne Lecourbe, “and the depression in their trade is due to that. They are very proud of their financial rehabilitation; in the last analysis, it is nothing more than a bonus granted to wealth already made.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Roger. “We must all come to the crisis of trade depression one day or another . . . Look at Germany . . . The English have got over their illness earlier; perhaps they were right; it’s less dangerous . . .

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

It's like measles—better to have had it . . . Then, at the moment, we in this country are exporting right enough, but below world-prices; and we are slowly devouring our substance.”

“That is not altogether true,” said his sister. “A price is made up of two elements: the raw material which, bought with gold, must be sold for gold; and then the labour. If, with his smaller wages, the French working man can live as well as the English working man, that does not impoverish France, since our food is produced in the country.”

“But it does,” said her brother. “Look here, Yvonne, push the argument *ad absurdum*. The paper franc falls to nearly nil . . . Good, the French peasant continues to feed the French weaver, who sells his labour for nothing to English or American customers . . . That amounts to saying that the French become a nation of slaves in the service of the pound and the dollar.”

“The wise thing, obviously,” said Yvonne, “would be to call a halt and stabilize the franc. . . . Shall we have the courage for it?”

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

She spoke with great animation, from time to time crossing her legs with a quick movement which exposed her grey woollen stockings as far as the knees.

The economic discussion continued for long on this note. When the young Lecourbes had gone, Bernard said enthusiastically to Françoise:

“She is splendid, that Yvonne! She’s like a good car; you can flog her, but she responds magnificently.”

“What a queer way of dressing!” said Françoise.

And she sighed.

Then she spoke of her house:

“I have got fig-trees, Bernard, and orange-trees, roses between the olives and an Italian garden with great jars of brown earthenware . . . You must come and look us up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*"The terrible thing is that there
is nothing terrible.*

TURGENIEV



AN immense multitude followed the funeral-procession. At eleven o'clock, sirens and whistles had proclaimed the closing of the works in the Valley. All the workmen had come. On violet ribbons you could read: "The staff of the spinning-department in the manufactories of Messrs. Quesnay and Lecourbe," "The Staff of the Water-Side Weaving Department," "The Directors of the Louviers Carbonization Works to their Chairman," "The Fire-Brigade to its Benefactor."

Pont-de-l'Eure cemetery lies on the hill overlooking the town. On leaving the church, the long black *cortège* set out on the steep road that leads past the Quesnay works. Bernard, who, up till then, had been walking with bowed head,

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

lifted up his eyes and contemplated the hearse covered with flowers. Then, unconsciously, he occupied his mind with identifying the buildings. Here and there an open door afforded a glimpse of piled-up pieces, teasels, drums, yellowish runlets. ‘The spinning-room . . . the burling-room . . . the milling-room . . . the scouring-room! . . . Why, the dye-house is still steaming!’ In front of him the coffin glided slowly along, as if it were passing them in review, those silent work-rooms. Monsieur Achille was going his last round.

Monsieur Pascal Bouchet gently took Bernard’s arm, who looked at him. That fine pink face had aged, the white beard was now planted amid deep, bluish ravines. He too would soon be going the same road. With a sweep of the arm he drew Bernard’s attention back to the great factory and said: “*Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*, my dear Bernard.” The *cortège* stopped abruptly: the master of the ceremonies was changing the pallbearers: “His honour the Prefect of the Eure! . . . His worship the Mayor of Louviers! . . . The President of the

Chamber of Commerce! . . .” Monsieur Pascal Bouchet dropped Bernard’s arm.

With a great effort of the horses, who slipped on the frozen surface of the road, the hearse got under way again. Those behind resumed their progress. Roger Lecourbe looked at Bernard, who was walking alone, slightly ahead. He debated internally whether his cousin was feeling any grief. ‘I think,’ he said to himself, ‘he must rather be feeling that he has come into his heritage, that from now on he is the boss, and that it is a very heavy burden . . . He hasn’t said a word since morning, except to give instructions . . . And yet one cannot say that Bernard is another Monsieur Achille. He is much more conscious of what he is at. That perhaps is a pretty fine thing in the men of to-day—this faculty for standing outside themselves, of resigning themselves to the ensuing friction. The marionettes have come to understand the play, and yet go on playing. What is that phrase of Barrè’s: “To savour even to madness the stinging joy of feeling yourself different from yourself . . .” No, it is much better put: “*I savour even to . . .*”’

They were passing into the cemetery. The narrower roadway dislocated the procession. Behind Roger Lecourbe strangers were now walking. "No, no," an old gentleman was saying, "I can't live in that Einstein universe of yours. The notion that space is finite hurts me." "Keep calm, Edouard, keep calm," a voice replied, "you may have your infinite space." He also heard: "As long as you increase the speed of cars without at the same time improving the roads . . ."

Then the movements of the multitude carried towards him a young man's voice: "She's a pretty little piece, but her legs are beastly." Roger thought of his lady—hers were divine. She was a cultured and complicated Swede whom he had known at the *Ecole des Sciences Politiques*. A sudden surge of desire swept over him. He closed his eyes for a second and then, opening them again, was surprised to see graves and thousands of black-gloved hands. He had lost ground and Bernard was now separated from him by a whole field of bare heads.

When he succeeded in coming up to his cousin, now standing motionless in front of a tomb in-

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

scribed "Quesnay Family Vault," the ceremony was almost over. Monsieur Cantaert was delivering an oration: "In the name of the staff of the firm of Quesnay and Lecourbe, it is my melancholy privilege to bid a last farewell . . ." He was no doubt experiencing an involuntary consolation in the thought that, from his oaken box, the terrible old man could make no retort. Bernard turned round for a moment and gazed at the crowd around him, then at the high chimneys gently smoking. Lines and colours were clear. A trace of snow emphasized the black branches of the trees. The flat roofs of the Quesnay works, the cement tanks full of cold blue water, the long metal sheds in which the wool was stored formed as it were a protecting barbarian citadel over the town.

Roger Lecourbe again watched Bernard, who was very pale, and thought: 'Some day, no doubt, I shall be in the front row here and some one will be saying: "Farewell, Monsieur Bernard, farewell . . ." What sort of a life will he have had?'

For long the crowd filed past. Strong hands

♥♥ Bernard Quesnay ♥♥

a thousand times crushed Bernard's, who bowed mechanically and said: "Thank you, Heurtematte . . . Thank you, Quibel . . . Thank you, Madame Quimouche . . . Thank you, Ricard . . . Thank you, Monsieur Leclerc . . ." Customers had come. Monsieur Roch murmured: "Ah, my dear Bernard, your poor grandfather . . . I shall always see him sitting in front of that table . . ." Many of the old women from the mill were crying. For a long time Bernard hoped he would see Simone. There was no reason for her to be there, but every time that, turning his head to the left, he saw at a distance fair hair or a young woman, he said to himself: 'It's she . . .' When he looked to the right he saw, a little farther on, the firm, serious profile of Yvonne Lecourbe, her short-sighted eyes protected by large tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles. Françoise had stepped back a pace and was standing behind the family leaning upon her husband's shoulder. About one o'clock the end of that interminable frieze of heads and black neckties hove in sight. Monsieur Cantaert came up, hat in hand.

“ Bernard Quesnay ”

“Monsieur Bernard,” he said in a low voice,
“Monsieur Roch wishes to know whether you
will be at the mill at two o’clock.”

“Of course,” said Bernard.

(1)

THE END

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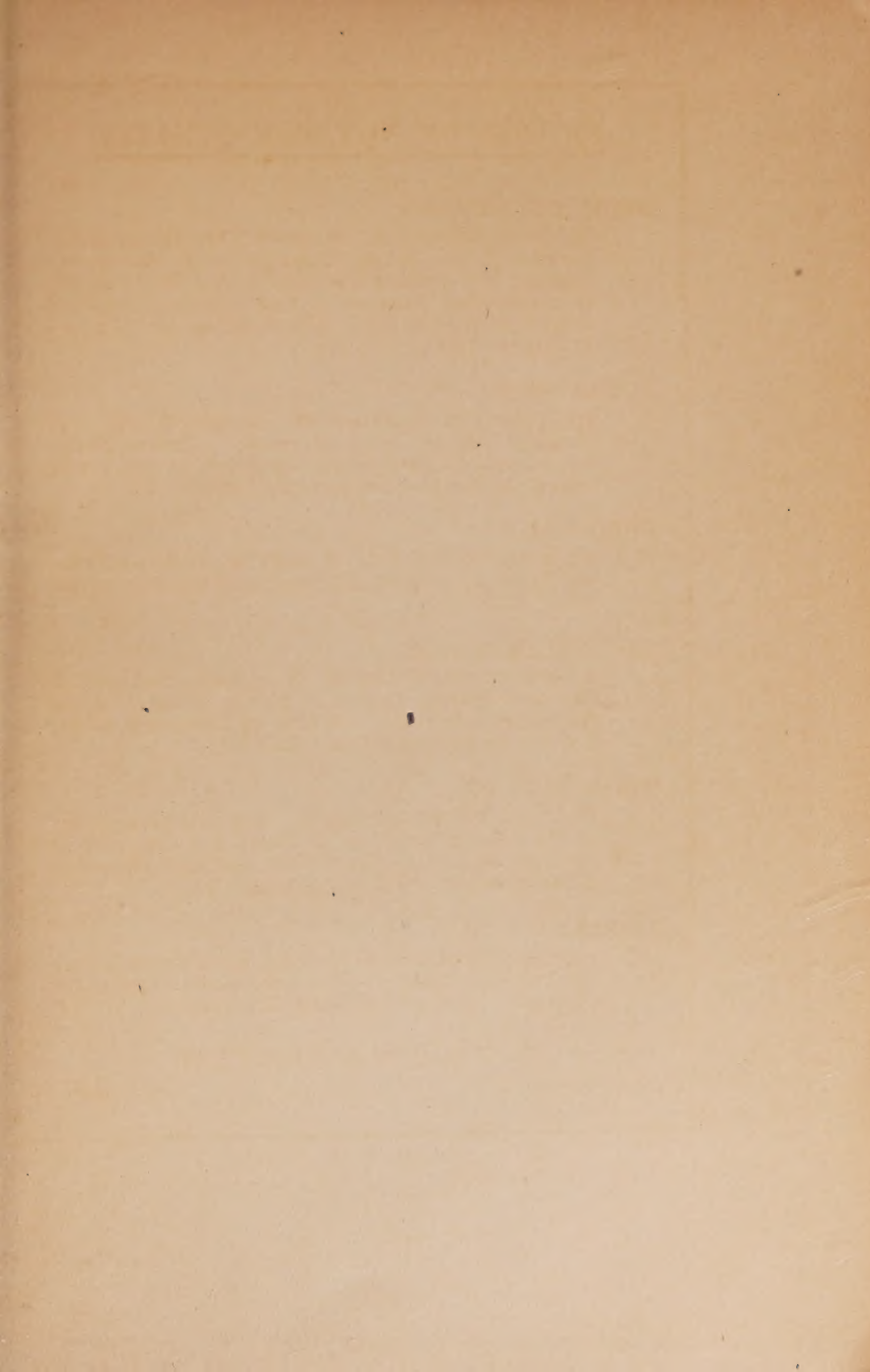
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